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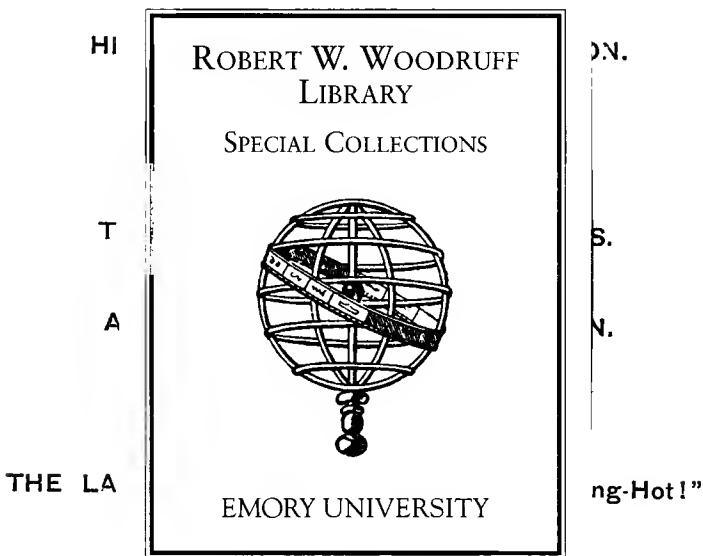
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XXIV

THE RED BAND.

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

IN TWO VOL.—VOL. II.

THE ONLY UNABRIDGED TRANSLATION.

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1887.

THE RED BAND.

PART II.

VIII.

SAINT-SENIER bounded backwards, and pushed Régine aside so as to cover her with his body. The hut was tenanted—a most awkward discovery for sure. In their situation any meeting was a danger, and all strangers foes. Hence, his first impulse was defence. With a swift jerk of the shoulders, he shook off the pack which might hamper him, and had even the presence of mind to throw it down where it would prevent the enemy leaving the place. At the same time he swung his pick up so as to be ready to strike. Régine seemed to have appreciated the danger for, leaving her companion full liberty of movement, she faced round to the peril in the rear, of the Prussians by chance recovering the track.

The night was thick enough anyway, and the darkness was furthermore augmented by the tall trees arching their boughs into a dome over the hovel. Hence, they could not make out the primary occupant of the rural retreat. He had as yet only revealed his presence by the challenge so smartly flung out at Saint-Senier, who anxiously wondered with whom he had to deal. Was he a wood-cutter come to avoid the cold, a forest-ranger on his rounds, or a spy on the lookout? All these surmises were equally plausible. The one certainty was that the surprised individual had called out in French, without any accent whatever. So the officer thought he ought not to withhold the conventional answer :

“Friend !”

The hearer did not seem at first blush to be very impressed by this encouraging form of speech, for he was in no hurry to renew or complete his challenge.

“Who are you, yourself ?” added Saint-Senier rather rudely.

“That’s no answer,” remarked the unknown ; “tell me what you want and I will name myself afterwards.”

“I came to have a rest, that is all,” returned the lieutenant, who did not care to enter into a quarrel.

“I don’t prevent you,” grumbled the other, in a far from inviting **one**.
“There is room enough for two.”

“I want it for three.”

“Three ! Aren’t you alone ?”

“No,” was Roger’s laconic reply.

“That makes a difference. The hut is too small, and if you both stay here I must go outside.”

"Oh, a woman does not count, and we shall manage to pack in somehow."

"Is that one of the fair sex there, behind you?" inquired the man, whose eyes must have been good for him to have distinguished Régine's position in the gloom.

"Yes, my sister, and as she is very tired; I have no time to waste at the door," responded the officer impatiently.

"Tut, tut, don't be angry! The moment a lady is in question, we shall contrive it somehow."

"If you'll come nearer and show us the way it will be more polite," observed Saint-Senier, who little cared to advance further under this roof which might conceal an enemy.

"I will do better than that—we will have a light," said the stranger.

The lieutenant was going to protest against an imprudence which might draw the Prussians, but he reflected that the confession of his fears would betray the secret of his flight, so he held his tongue. The blue glare of sulphur illuminated the obscurity, and the sharp snapping of a match, struck on the wall, proved that the host of the hovel was keeping his promise. Ten seconds after the flicker of a candle showed the interior which the lieutenant could encompass with a glance.

"Here you are!" exclaimed the other almost gaily; "your room is ready, and so is the lady's, for they are the same."

Without answering this attempt at a joke, the officer quickly raised his pack, and still keeping his pick in his right fist, stepped up to the doorway. The girl followed him without any sign of uneasiness. Though the meaning of the brief dialogue must have escaped her, she had doubtless reckoned up the state of things, for by her calmness it might be believed that she had expected such an encounter. Before passing through the doorway, low enough to oblige him to stoop, Roger threw a rapid glance upon the hovel and its occupier. Built of rough-hewn pine logs roughly jointed, covered with thatch and having no windows, this primitive habitation must have formerly served for the forest-rangers when out a-field. There was no flooring at all, and the furniture consisted of three or four trusses of hay, and a tree-stump serving as a stool. As for the man momentarily sheltered by the rustic roof, he was a rather stout fellow, owner of a jolly face, and clad in a grey blouse. He stood up, raising in one hand the candle placed in a small lantern, and shading his eyes with the other to examine the newcomers. There was nothing hostile in his air or attitude, there was no surprise possible in the narrow space comprised by the four wooden walls. All this was reassuring and Saint-Senier determined to go in. He took the girl's hand to ensure her following him closely, and shut the door carefully behind them. He was anxious to learn into what company chance had cast him, and he hastened to employ the infallible means of attaining his end which consists in speaking of one's self so that others have to return the compliment. Besides he considered it indispensable to meet questions more than half-way, and to play his part of hawkster naturally.

"Couldn't help it, mate," he said, trying to take the familiar tone in keeping with his calling, "but we must have given you a fine scare!"

"Scare me? No fear! I assure you," faltered the stranger. "I have nothing to hide—nothing to fear, I mean."

This embarrassment and eagerness to protest against the supposition struck the lieutenant as singular.

"Oh, of course not," he proceeded, as if convinced, "but you know

how it is at night ; in such times and in the thick of the woods, a body never knows who he has to deal with."

" Well, that's true enow," said the other, " and when a man is carrying his goods, he starts at a trifle."

" Goods, eh ?" repeated Saint-Senier.

" Yes indeed ; and a full parcel, too," went on the stranger, opening a pack lying in a corner. " You see a packman who—"

" A packman," ejaculated the officer, before he could think to govern his amazement.

" Rather, and quite at your service, mate," muttered the other, eyeing him askance.

It was difficult to imagine a more annoying coincidence for the escaped lieutenant, who had nothing towards his assumed calling save the dress and paraphernalia. The idea of being obliged to chat about the fairs and the market rates of goods with a knowing hand, threw him into the greatest perplexity. If dissimulation had been possible, he would have freely renounced the character under which he meant to have travelled ; but the pack sufficed to class him, and the stranger was scanning him attentively.

" Are you one of the trade, too ?" observed the Chapman.

" Rather ! any one can see that !" ejaculated the officer, feeling that there was no drawing back.

" That's a staggerer ! how odd things do fall out," commented the man in the blouse.

Oddly indeed ! he did not appear any more glad than Roger at the meeting and the latter perceived as much.

" Then you are on the tramp from—" questioned the pedlar with more and more marked hesitation.

" From Saint-Germain," interrupted the lieutenant, " and I am bound for —"

" Poissy, I daresay," the other packman hastened to suggest, discounting the reply.

" Yes, out that way unless I take in Maisons —"

" Then we'll not be journeying together, for I am going towards Achères. What a pity we must part," observed the stranger in a tone belying the regret so obligingly expressed.

" This is queer," thought Saint-Senier ; " he shows the same desire to go his way alone as I to be rid of him." Aloud he said : " There is not company so good that there's no parting —"

" As King Dagobert said to his dogs," facetiously interrupted the true or false packman.

" And when my sister has rested an hour or so, we'll be off, for we have a good piece to foot."

" It's true the lass must be tired, poor thing !" said the stranger, examining Régine with more attention than heretofore.

" Oh ! she's a brave girl and never blabs—she is a deaf mute."

" You don't say so ! Ah, poor thing !" exclaimed the other, seeming sincere this time.

" As heaven wills it, yes ! but that does not prevent her knowing how to sell ! she can work off old stock better than I," went on Roger, bethinking himself of his rôle.

" Faith, mate, I haven't much to offer you," said the other ; " but if you don't mind a crust and a glass of wine, I have in my pack the wherewithal to give the three of us a snatch-meal."

Saint-Senier hesitated an instant; but he fancied he saw in Régine's eyes the counsel to accept.

"Catch me refusing, old fellow!" he responded, preparing the stool for the girl and a truss of straw for himself.

"That's the ticket! we can have a jaw whilst we are eating," cried the stranger, "and I shall not be sorry either, for I have been by myself these three days so that my tongue is choking me with rust."

Then, as though he feared having said too much, he dropped on his knees to open his pack and Roger fancied that he coloured up at the reference to his loneliness. In a chapman who went from fair to fair this was indeed rather extraordinary.

"I must find out what this fellow is," mused the officer.

IX.

EVENTS had been so rapid and unforeseen since the lieutenant escaped from the Saint-Germain hospital that he had had no time for reflection. The expedition to the Chêne-Capitaine, the arrival of the Prussians, the firing of the underwood, the flight through the forest, all these episodes, fatally interchained, had been undergone without comment. He was even bereft of that consolation of the unfortunates who can share their woes with a friend, since his sole companion could neither hear nor speak. On arriving at the hut, Roger had hoped to have had the only conversation possible with the strolling-player, to wit, the use of the slate or the lettered counters she always carried with her to give expression to her thoughts. He had so much to tell her, so much news to ask her of all those dear to him that he longed for that silent conversation.

Delivered unexpectedly and compelled to flee in hot haste, the prisoner of war had not yet found the indispensable quiet loneliness in which to confer with his liberator, and yet, ere going further, it was most necessary to concert on the continuance of the plan of evasion. Therefore the reader will easily imagine how upset he was by the meeting with the pedlar. This first occupant of the cabin where he had intended to rest and obtain the information he longed for was a witness as inconvenient as compulsory. Moreover, there was something out of the way in his bearing as well as in his person and speech well calculated to puzzle the lieutenant. Perhaps Régine participated in his distrust, but she let nothing of this be seen, for her companion, already habituated to read in her eyes, could discover no other expression than that of attentive curiosity. Whilst all these thoughts were crowding in Saint-Senier's brain, the stranger finished the preliminaries of a snack with obliging eagerness. Out of his valise he drew a loaf of white bread, such as the besieged Parisians would have paid dear for, a cold chicken, some cheese and apples. He spread it all out on a handsome new red neckerchief borrowed from his store for a tablecloth, and completed the appetising set-out by detaching from his belt a leather flask which he placed before him with marked respect.

"You see, mate, that we shall not collapse with hunger this evening," he said, merrily.

"That we sha'n't," cried Roger, "and I am not so rich as you for I never thought to lay in provisions at Saint-Germain. I was in such a haste that I—"

"That doesn't matter. When there's plenty for one there's enough for

three," interrupted the host of the log cabin without noticing the blunder made by the guest in excusing himself.

A hawker in such hurry as to forget to eat was little likely, and so the lieutenant, perceiving his error rather late, hastened to add :

"But I fear to rob you of your meal—you may have a long journey before you?"

"I!" ejaculated the stranger, "my trip will be over to-night, and at this hour to-morrow, one way or another, I shall not need my comestibles."

It was the turn of the donor to bite his lips after this sentence which deeply struck his companion.

"Then your trip is done?" he queried, looking him straight in the face.

"No, no; that is not what I meant to say; but, you know, yonder, Maisons way, a man can get all he wants—"

"Eh! I thought you were bound for Achères?"

This time, Saint-Senier quite distinctly saw the blood mount to the pedlar's cheek, as, instead of replying, he set to carving the chicken with animation. This was not the moment to press the charge, but he could no longer doubt the existence of a mystery and, whilst promising to search it out, the young gentleman resolved to be more circumspect himself. This cheap Jack was of dubious worth, with his bag of plentiful viands and his ignorance whither he was bound. Spies were swarming around the Prussian lines and would wear all kinds of dress. It was now or never to mistrust everybody.

"Come, come, mate, pass this wing to the pretty child who sits opposite me," said the stranger off-handedly.

Saint-Senier proceeded to help Régine, who raised no difficulty about accepting, and all ate away with a lusty appetite. The girl, though ordinarily most indifferent to the material details of life, appeared to find pleasure in the meal this evening, which came in very timely, besides, after so long and painful a march. The tranquillity she evinced, calmed the officer a little, as he had the greatest confidence in her sagacity. Nevertheless, while doing honour to the supper, he did not neglect to surreptitiously study the hospitable comrade given him by chance. His physical appearance went for little. He was a man of some years, going on for forty, of medium stature, rather stout than thin, and gifted with features as regular as unmeaning. The dominant expression was jollity, tempered by a reserve of which the reason was not yet clearly apparent. There was always a smile on the thick lips and restlessness in the small grey eyes, but not the least trickery. The whole absolutely lacked distinction, and yet the complexion was not tanned as should have been that of a man whose calling obliged him to dwell perpetually in the open-air. Though large and thick, his hands were not those of a labourer. In short, the externals were those of a clerk or petty townsman, and not at all of a pedlar, and still less of a workman. His language to boot did not belie the vulgar exterior, and Roger fancied he perceived a favourable token in the mixture of cordiality and reticence which characterised his conversation.

"After all," he considered, "he may have potent reasons for hiding himself and no evil intentions."

Whilst he was concentrating all his mental faculties upon this problem, the meal silently continued, and the flask which served as cup, went the round. The amphitryon particularly had recourse to it frequently, and in proportion to its being relieved, he lost his reserve and shone out as a talker.

It was a good occasion to sound him deftly, and the officer did not fail to do so.

"I say, mate," he demanded, without appearing to attach any great importance to the matter, "how are our good folk in the army of the Loire getting on?"

The stranger frowned barely perceptibly, and answered with a shrug of the shoulders :

"'Pon my word, I don't know. I have been cutting about Normandy and I only busy myself to learn if cotton and ribbons are selling well."

"The same here! but that does not prevent a man being French, and his blood boiling only to hear these Prussians brag. Will you believe it that they prated loudly in the cafés of Saint-Germain that Paris could not hold out a week!"

"A lot of braggarts, just so!" answered the packman philosophically.

"All the same I am afraid the Parisians will not hold out for long. I saw a miller yesterday who had a hand in supplying corn-stuff before the siege, and he knows his business. He told me that the flour would not outlast the year."

"That's not true!" broke in the pedlar with vivacity; "Paris has bread for six weeks, and horseflesh for four months—"

"How do you know?" asked Roger.

"I—I heard so. You know, in the fairs, everybody has his say, and—I keep my ears open," faltered the visibly confused man.

"Oh, I am not casting any reproach on you; for though I may sell to the Germans and make money out of them, I remain French in the first place, and when I meet sound patriots like you, it warms my heart. Here is your health, lad!"

"Here's yours!" answered the packman, taking the sensibly lightened flask out of his new friend's hand.

"Faith! since you are so hearty a chum," said Roger, "you shall put me up to a little wrinkle."

"Freely yours, if mine."

"Do you know if they will ask for one's passport at Maisons?"

"Why, yes, as they do everywhere."

"The fact is, I am afraid mine will not pass muster, and I wanted to know—"

"I can't tell you," interrupted the chapman quickly; "the practice changes according to the place."

"But you are all right with yours?"

"Certainly; it's signed by two commandants and a major—"

"Prussians?"

"Naturally. There's my name on it, Pierre Bourdier, if you want to know it, and all the rest of it: born at Rouen, coming from Evreux, and going to Beauvais."

This sentence, full of information, was rattled off with a glibness which displayed both testiness at being interrogated, and the fear of being obliged to show his papers. The emotion did not escape Saint-Senier, who remained convinced he had to do with a false pedlar, and who resolved to act henceforth accordingly. For the moment he would have to submit to this rather dubious companionship, but he fell to puzzling on the best means of shortening it. The supper was coming to an end, Régine seemed perfectly recovered from her weariness, and it was time to put the rest of the night to profit by making off as soon as the route to follow was decided

upon. The thing was to find a pretext to break up the sitting, and above all to separate for good from the suspicious character.

"I only wish I could stay here till daytime," he sighed, as he munched an apple, "but we have some road to go, and I believe we shall have to be off in less than a quarter of an hour."

"Don't let me hinder you, mate," was the rejoinder in a tone which allowed a similar desire to peep out as strongly as Roger's.

The latter was rising to make Régine understand his intentions, when somebody tapped softly at the cabin door.

X.

THREE little raps had been struck so gently that it had needed an ear as sharp and alert as Saint-Senier's for them to be heard. The packman, absorbed in conscientiously absorbing a final draught, paid no heed to the trifling sounds. As for Régine, her turning her head towards the door could only be through hazard or instinct since her infirmity put her out of court. Roger fancied himself mistaken. How could one believe that at that hour of the night anybody would come knocking at the door of a hut deep in the woods? And how could the caller approach thus without announcing his presence by his steps upon paths strewn with sere leaves and twigs? Amid the utter stillness of this wild nook, the least crackle aroused an echo. Nevertheless, at a chance, the officer rose, and asked of his host :

"Did you hear nothing?"

"I? nothing at all," replied the pedlar, with an air of surprise indubitably not assumed.

"I fancied there was somebody—"

"Where?"

"There, at the door."

"Indeed?" queried the supper-giver, unable to help turning pale.

"Yes, I could have sworn there was a knock."

"The wind, no doubt."

In giving this explanation, he did not appear self-convinced, and his trouble excited suspicion in his hearer.

"Can he be working with some prowler to betray us to the Prussians?" he mused.

At the instant of this fear striking his overwrought imagination, the knocking was repeated, and placed beyond doubt.

Some being announced his presence, and asked for admittance. The man who had given the name of Pierre Bourdier was on his feet in less than a second, and briskly thrust his hand under his smock-frock, as if after a weapon; Roger grasped his pick-handle, which he had taken care to lift when he rose. Forgetting their mutual distrust, both faced the door.

"Should it be a Prussian?" muttered the officer.

"We'll settle him," concluded the packman, blanched, but grinding his teeth, and his easy-going countenance suddenly donned a resolute expression that startled Saint-Senier. Régine alone had not stirred, though her companions' behaviour must have warned her of danger. She may have already reflected that if the Germans had discovered the cabin, they would not have made so much ado about entering.

"Ready, lad?" demanded the lieutenant.

"To knock over two or three—rather?"

"Then I will open, and you may rely on my helping you."

Whoever the visitor was, he could not have lost any of this dialogue through the thin plank door, but he, doubtlessly, was not daunted, for he went on tapping with the same softness and regularity. If an enemy, it must be owned that he did not proceed by violence, for five minutes had elapsed in hesitation and defensive preparations, and none could show himself more patient. Perchance, this was all a lure to decoy the occupants of the hut outside, and Roger, suspecting as much, acted in accordance. The door opened inward. He waved Régine and Bourdier on one side, so as to be out of the light of the lantern, which he did not wish extinguished on account of the confusion likely to ensue. He placed himself in such a way that, on pulling the door in, he would be covered, and yet free to take the enemy in flank. But he who presented himself was nowise alarming. Scarce was the way open before a slight figure appeared on the sill, at the same time as a plaintive voice whined this appeal:

"Kind masters, charity, if you please?"

Not in the least expecting to hear the mendicant's stereotyped claim, the officer leaped in surprise, and came from cover to see this singular beggar who sought alms by night in the woods.

"Come in!" he cried sharply; but as the pleader did not hasten to advance, he repeated: "Come in, confound you!" and, stretching out his arms, he took the loiterer by the collar.

The deed was executed with so much promptness and precision that the door was flung to again, and the beggar hurled into the middle of the room before he had time to answer. The creature so roughly added to the party did not justify the precautions taken against him by his humble and weakly appearance. He was a boy of thirteen or fourteen at most, whose sunken cheeks expressed suffering, and whose rickety frame showed nothing alarming. He was apparelled in sordid rags, which barely clung to his body. His feet, blue with cold, were without any covering, which explained how he had noiselessly crept up to the cabin door. His low forehead was covered by a mass of matted red hair, half hiding his eyes. This wretched object carried a thin bag over his shoulder, with nothing but dry crusts in the flattened pouches, if they contained anything.

The most hardened heart would have found it difficult to stand on the defensive against such misery, and Saint-Senier could not help remorse at thinking how he had prolonged the urchin's pains by leaving him so long outside. He was ashamed also for having entirely wasted so much strategy, and hastened to lay aside his weapon and threatening air. On the other hand, the youth did not appear in any way intimidated. He stood upright on his thin legs, his arms akimbo, and, as well as could be judged by the direction of his look through the thicket of his hair, he examined Régine with particular attention. If venturesome surmises were to be hazarded, they would centre on the impression that he had expected to find men only in the retreat, and that the woman's presence disconcerted him. Dressed as she was, Régine wore nothing which ought to have roused the astonishment of a country lad.

"What do you want, youngster?" challenged the pedlar, who observed his new guest with lingering distrust.

"Charity, my kind masters," repeated the boy in the same monotonous tone.

"We are not millionaires," rejoined Pierre Bourdier, "but you can have a bit of bread, if you like."

The child did not reply.

"Speak out, are you hungry?" asked Roger.

"Oh, dear, yes, my kind gentleman."

"And thirsty, too, eh?"

"Oh, dear, yes, my kind gentleman."

This phrase must have been learnt by heart, for he recited it like a lesson.

"Then sit you down, and here are some crumbs," said the hawker, pointing out a truss of straw, and setting before the juvenile guest the bread and cheese, and the three-parts emptied flask.

The beggar obeyed without further parley and pulled a horn-handled knife out of his pocket so hastily as to draw something else with it, which dropped on the straw without sound, and attacked his supper. Roger and the hawker resumed their places, and watched their guest eating. They were not slow to exchange a glance, the same thought having struck them both. This famished tatterdemalion, instead of devouring the unhoped-for sustenance offered him, plied his jaws with singular leisure. The tiny bits of bread that he cut seemed to go down his gullet with difficulty, and he partook of very little of the cheese. In fact, it was without any gusto that he accomplished the interesting operation of satisfying his appetite after a long fast.

"Where do you come from in this style, youngster?" demanded Bourdier.

The lad slowly swallowed a crust before answering, as though seeking his words.

"My kind masters," he finally said, "I got lost in the woods."

"Did you? But what were you doing in the woods?"

Then followed a fresh silence till the beggar-boy replied with his invariable preamble :

"My kind gentleman, I was coming home from Carrières, where I had driven uncle's cows."

"So you belong to the neighbourhood?"

"I should rather say I did."

"Then can you take us from here to Maisons or Achères?"

"I should rather say I could," said the lad quickly, forgetting his usual opening this time; "I know all the roads and can take you anywhere blindfold."

"Can you indeed!" ejaculated the hawker. "Then how came you to go astray?"

Caught in the snare set by Bourdier, the boy swayed about on his bent legs, and said stupidly :

"Don't know."

"He's an idiot," muttered Roger.

But the hawker winked, as much as to say, "He's not such a fool as he looks," and resumed :

"If you will put us on the Maisons road, I will give you a twenty-sous piece."

"I should be ever so glad, but I should have to go along with you," replied the youth, unhesitatingly.

"That will do. We will start when you have finished your supper."

"Oh, I can munch my bread on the way," said the boy, leaping up.

"He is in a deuced hurry to guide us," thought Roger, just as he felt the packman slip something into his hand which had fallen from the beggar's pocket, and which he had picked up.

He rose and naturally turned round to examine what was so secretly handed him. It was a Prussian thaler-piece.

XI.

THIS discovery had a meaning about which it was difficult to be mistaken. The thaler had not come into the beggar's pocket by itself, and none but an enemy could have put it there. The German pay-masters were not liberal, and would not have paid the boy unless he had rendered them services, which could only be those of a spy. All these logical inferences swiftly succeeded one another in Saint-Senier's brain, and it was enough to glance at the hawker to see that the same thoughts were his.

"Half a minute, young one, we're not in such a hurry as all that," said Bourdier, no doubt meaning to gain time to reflect before acting.

The situation was considerably altered. Not that the youngster was a very dreadful enemy whom two strong men could not readily master ; they could drive him away or fasten him up in the hut ; they had a choice of methods, but these expedients could remedy nothing, and the danger existed the same as ever. What was there to prove that the Prussians were not hidden in the environs, ready to run up at the first signal or outcry of the child ? Still, on second thoughts, Lieutenant de Saint-Senier ended by believing the hypothesis was little probable. The beggar's eagerness to be on the road seemed to cover other projects. The intention to betray was evident, but it could not be of instant execution. Everything on the contrary announced that the young scamp meditated conducting the inmates of the hut straight into the Prussian lines, offering himself as a guide with that perfidious intention. To refuse his proposal was not difficult, but how then prevent him from following the fugitives at a distance and denouncing them to the first hostile post upon the road ? Very embarrassing were all these questions, and the first point was to arrange some course of action together. The hawker's picking up the thaler had dissipated Roger's suspicions as regarded him, and he was a little consoled for the mishap at the thought of meeting a sure ally. But he still wanted a means of conversing with him without being overheard by the imp and exciting his distrust.

The horrid urchin had squatted down again, and was peeling an apple, probably to give himself a countenance. His face, animated for an instant, when departure was spoken of, had resumed its stupid expression. However, his large ears were pricked under his red hair as if to remind the two pedlars that their every word would be listened to. The packman had rested his elbows on his knees, and his chin in his hands, evidently brooding over a means of getting out of the maze and shirking the undesirable company of the mendicant. Roger, on his side, was instinctively seeking Régine's eyes, which he was in the habit of reading in thorny dilemmas. But what likelihood was there of her coming to his aid when her infirmity condemned her to remain a stranger to all outward events ? The silence was deep, and even very strange, for the lad darted sly questioning glances on the trio ; he seemed wondering why the start was not made. The officer's surprise was extreme when he saw Régine open her bag and

take out some petty coins and a pack of cards. For an instant he thought she had gone mad, but she appeared quite calm, and her heretofore grave face became smiling. She put the pack before her with perfect coolness and laid down a silver piece. The boy watched her in stupefaction and never stirred, yet Roger noticed the twinkle in his eyes as the girl displayed her little hoard. She touched his arm and nodded her head in a questioning manner.

"Play cards? Do you want me to play?" inquired the lad, who had understood.

"Yes," meant Régine's nod.

"Oh, I am game for it! I can play 'beggar my neighbour,'" cried he joyfully, clutching the cards.

"By Jove, that's a good idea!" muttered the hawker, giving the officer a sly wink.

"So you don't mind, little man, winning a few sous before we start, eh?" questioned Roger.

"Oh, ay, my kind master, it would please me," sighed the boy, resuming his lamentable mien.

"But how are you going to pay, if you lose?" jokingly inquired Bourdier.

"Catch me losing," retorted the little imp, sharply.

At this declaration which impudently revealed the intention of cheating, the lieutenant could not forbear laughing, but his host, who did not lose sight of important matters, rose, saying:

"I think that we'll have time to smoke a pipe outside, the smell of the tobacco will inconvenience the young woman, who can amuse herself with the little chap whilst we are blowing a cloud."

"I am going with you!" ejaculated Saint-Senier, understanding and not knowing whether most to admire the last speaker's ingenious idea or Régine's happy fancy.

The lad was already shuffling the cards with a feverish rapidity that in no wise interfered with his dexterity. Kings, queens, and other cards slipped between his hooked fingers with incredible swiftness, and he dovetailed one-half into the other open-leaved with the steadiness of a card-juggler. The two new friends believed they could surprise on his weazen features the passing expression of a suspicion when they spoke of going out, however, greed quickly secured the upper hand.

"Well, good luck, youngster," called out Pierre Bourdier, opening the door, "and be ready to start when I've finished with my cutty."

"Don't you fret," muttered the rogue, without turning round.

The game had already commenced, and Régine was gathering up with perfect gravity the few takes her adversary let her win.

To complete the deception, the hawker had made a parade of a clay pipe and a full tobacco-pouch, into which Saint-Senier made a show of diving. As soon as they were over the threshold and had carefully closed the ramshackle door which defended the cabin entrance, the two packmen exchanged a shake of the hand, and Pierre Bourdier whispered into the other's ear this concise phrase:

"Behind the boulder yonder."

In ten seconds they were there face to face fifteen paces away and below the cabin.

XII.

A **HUGE** block of freestone overhung the hollow chosen by the packman to hold the urgent conference together. It was he who spoke first.

"Sir," said he, changing his tone and language, "you held me in as much distrust as I did you, but I think that at present you know how things stand."

"Certainly," said Roger, though still preserving some remnant of disquietude and not wishing to unbosom himself without full knowledge.

"Come, come," proceeded the man in the grey blouse. "I see plain enough that I must lead off with a clean record, for we have no time to lose. To begin with, I am no more a Cheap Jack than you are."

"Indeed!" coldly said the officer, who still mistook the intentions this speech.

"Hark ye, sir," continued the pseudo-hawker without being disconcerted, "I do not know how to make pretty speeches; but I am as straight as a reed, and I believe I am a little bit of a physiognomist. An hour ago I saw through your disguise."

Saint-Senier started back a step.

"Oh, I am not asking you your secret, but I am bound to tell you mine. You are looking upon a man charged with important dispatches from the general commanding the Army of the Loire, and I am quietly jogging towards Paris through the German lines. If I am caught, I shall be shot without respite. You have only to say one word or make a sign to that scoundrelly *kid* who is in there, and I shall be lagged. Do you still distrust me?"

These latter words were uttered with so much simplicity that they triumphed over all Roger's hesitation.

"You are a trump," said he, in a moved voice, tendering his new friend his hand which was cordially clasped.

"Faith, I grant I am," laughingly answered the pretended pedlar.

"And I am not going to rank below you," added the lieutenant. "I am an army officer—wounded and made prisoner two months ago. I escaped this evening from the Saint-Germain hospital, and if I fall into Prussian hands my trial will not last much longer than yours."

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Pierre Bourdier, "I do hope they won't take either of us. As for the—the lady—"

"I owe my liberty to her devotion, and—"

"You can tell me the tale hereafter; at present, what presses is to get out of this wasps' nest by ridding ourselves of this rascally little beggar."

"Yes; but if you see the way, you are cleverer than I."

"Oh, I see the way clear enough," was the hawker's answer.

"Tell it me," said Roger.

"Oh, it's simple enough," replied the other, "only it is part of a plan that may not suit you."

"Out with it anyhow."

"Before all I must know what you mean to do."

"How so?"

"You told me you were a prisoner at Saint-Germain, and succeeded in escaping, thanks to that girl's assistance—which does not astonish me, for she appears very intelligent; but I do not know where you want to go."

" As far as possible from the Prussians," the officer rather evasively rejoined, not yet freed of all suspicions.

" That's a matter of course ; but it is harder to carry out than to wish, for the rogues are everywhere, and whichever way you turn, you must cross their lines."

" What matters it then which road I take ?" said Roger, with the carelessness of a man resigned to every woe.

" On the contrary, it does enormously matter, and I will tell you why I am bound for Paris, as I have just acknowledged, and I am decided to arrive there or perish on the way. When I got out a fortnight ago, I was not ignorant of what I exposed myself to, and it is not after having the good fortune to fulfil half my mission that I mean to give up trying to complete it. On the other hand, you have your choice."

" What choice ?" inquired the lieutenant, slightly irritated by this preamble.

" Why, to join one of our armies in the country or the corps you were serving in when captured—for I am not going to insult you by supposing you think quietly going home while your native land is on her deathbed."

In uttering these final words, Pierre Bourdier was transfigured. There are situations which have the power to elevate men, and the hawker's vulgar speech became naturally purified in touching on his country's misfortunes.

" You are right, and you are a brave fellow," said Saint-Senier, deeply affected by the change.

" Oh, I am sure of that, and I well know with whom I am dealing. As I said before, a man does not risk scampering over hill and dale among chaps who only want to ballast him with bullets, unless he can judge his neighbour by the cut of his phiz."

" Yet you did distrust me a little at the start, confess it," said the officer, smiling.

" Not for long, and on that score, I believe you owe me nothing," returned Bourdier, wittily.

The lieutenant had to blush now for his precautions, but the worthy pack-man looked as if he did not perceive it.

" We were saying," he went on, " that from here you may, perhaps, contrive to reach the old fortifications of Paris, which have held out stoutly and will hold out for long, I hope."

" God grant it," muttered Roger.

" Or, on the other hand, steal away by short marches to Normandy or Maine and, as every road leads to Rome, join the army of the North or that of the Loire."

" That's true," granted the officer in a low tone, struck by the clearness with which his new friend showed the two alternatives.

" It's all a matter of taste," resumed Pierre merrily, " a man can be as useful to his country in one place as another, and it's as easy to be killed on the right as the left. There is now glory and danger all around for everybody."

" And I shall not give up my share," said Roger in a deep voice.

" Well then, comrade, choose your dish—call for it, and it will be served," exclaimed the hawker, whose natural facetiousness readily took the upper hand.

" I—I do not know—I have not made up my mind," muttered the

lieutenant, who had not yet had a second to concert with Régine, and did not wish to do anything without such a consultation.

"I can aid you, if you do not mind," proceeded Bourdier, "for I know all this like a book, and if you want information, I have a bushel for you."

"Speak on, my friend."

"In the first place, the way to the provinces is without doubt the easier one. You understand that the invader does not cover the whole country, and that our mobiles give them enough work so that they have no time to stop single persons travelling."

"That's probable, indeed."

"It's certain, and with a little skill, you can slip through their fingers. I will give you, if you determine on the West, a little guide to lead you to Conlie Camp as easily as you might go from Paris to Saint-Cloud."

"Do you think so?"

"So much so that I can mark down each stage and stop, as the quartermaster might your route. Every evening, or rather morning, for you should jog on through the night and lay by in the day, you will come upon some good rural acquaintance of mine, who will receive you with open arms when you give him the password I shall impart to you."

"And Régine would incur no dangers," breathed the officer as though speaking to himself.

"Less than in this confounded forest, I'll warrant that. To say nothing of my giving you a little lesson before we part on the right way to carry a pack and peddling goods; for I know that much, and, between oneself, you are not very well up in the tricks of the trade. Merely by the style of your dropping the pack to the ground on coming in, I twigged that you were no old hand."

"That's true," sighed Saint-Senier, "and I believe that I shouldn't deceive anybody."

"Bah! you'll pick it up; it is not so hard after all as amateur acting, and I'll undertake to educate you in less than an hour."

"I believe this course is the more prudent," remarked the officer.

"Not a doubt of it. Now, let's discuss the other. To march to Paris is rather rougher. There is no dodging the obstacles. Two lines of Prussians to pierce, the Seine to cross three times, and for the climax, a chance of getting hit by a French bullet by falling into the midst of our volunteer riflemen who have the weakness of blazing away at man or mouse at all hours of the night."

"A fig for that if I were alone," muttered the lieutenant, "but when a man has a woman with him—"

"Still," went on Pierre Bourdier, without appearing to hear this comment, "the reward for all this, is Paris and friends, kinsfolk, sisters, a betrothed, left there perhaps—"

His voice had become thrilling and his eyes sparkled.

"I am speaking on my account," he gently apologised.

"Nay," broke in Roger, "I also have friends in Paris, brothers-in-arms, a kinswoman."

"And then again, there is France," continued the hawker.

"France!" reiterated the other, ostensibly overcome by emotion.

"Yea, for so long as Paris holds out, our country will not be dead—though if she is taken—hang it all! at least I shall have the consolation of being buried in the ruins of the city where I was born."

Saint-Senier was no longer master of himself. He grasped the hand of

the heroic companion whom heaven had sent him, and hissed through his set teeth :

“We'll do it together, when you say ‘go !’”

“I was sure you would come with me,” declared Pierre Bourdier, whose enthusiasm suddenly gave way to cold resolution ; “I know what men are, and since an hour ago I felt I could rely on you, as you may on me.”

“We shall cut through or die all three together,” said Roger plainly.

“Now, mark me well,” pursued the brave secret messenger, “this makes the fourth time I have attempted the venture, and I know the land as well as you know your boyhood's home. For seven years I was a rural carrier and road surveyor, which is as much as to say that you can follow me as regards the road to take.”

“I only fear one thing, to be a burden on you.”

“Not a bit of it, captain,” returned Bourdier gaily, “union makes strength, as is graven around our coins, and you will see that it's a good motto.”

“Yes,” objected Roger, “but have you considered that a woman has neither the requisite strength nor spirit? I fear that my—my companion—”

“The lass along with you? Why, I should be downright sorry if she was not one of the party, and I even greatly reckoned on her helping us to pull through.”

“I do not doubt her courage, but—”

“My dear comrade,” said the hawker, “the girl who had the wit to engage that little monster so as to give us time to talk, is able to puzzle all Bismarck's Prussians. Take my word for it, if we have any bother in our trip, it will be she who will get us out of it.”

Saint-Senier had the same thought at heart as his new friend, and it would have been ill-timed to object any longer.

“Heaven will protect us,” he said in a steady voice, “and I am ready to go with you anywhere. What are we to do?”

“In the first place, shake off this blackguard boy, who will sell us before day-break unless I put a stopper on him. I know this breed of vipers and the way to destroy them.”

“State it quickly then, for we have been a long time talking and I fear he will suspect what we are hatching.”

“No fear—he is too busy cheating your lady.”

Indeed, since the two friends had come out, the silence had remained unbroken inside the cabin.

“You shall see how I'll handle him,” said Bourdier.

But at that moment a strange sound came through the chinks of the hut walls. Roger started and his ally turned quickly round.

XIII.

THE sound they heard resembled a scuffle, and it must have been a lively one for it to reach the two men.

“Hark !” exclaimed the officer. “It sounds like fighting in the hut.”

“Or someone walking through the woods.”

“Nay, the branches would crackle under foot. It's the sound of a struggle.”

“Impossible, Régine was alone with that imp.”

"The urchin is quite capable of strangling her to take her money," muttered Bourdier.

"Then, let's run there," cried the officer, struck by this idea which had not occurred to him at first.

"Faith ! I believe you're right. We will resume our chat by-and-by, for the pressing thing is to see what's going on yonder."

And away dashed the speaker followed closely by Saint-Senier. At the very moment when they passed the huge boulder overhanging the ravine they had just quitted, the cabin door flew abruptly open and a human form appeared on the threshold.

"Oh, you ragamuffin ! you scamp !" roared Bourdier, making but one bound to the spot.

But just as he was going to collar the beggar boy—for it was he who showed himself—the latter ducked so deftly that the packman's hand closed on space. Before he had time to repeat the attempt, the boy had darted off. Never had a snake glided more skilfully through the fingers about to crush it. Bourdier turned round quite too late, for the little rogue was already passed the cabin corner.

"Curse me, but I'll have you !" said the secret messenger, starting on the run.

The lad threw himself into the thicket out of sight, though he was still to be heard. Beyond doubt Pierre judged it of great moment not to let him escape, for he leaped after him among the bushes and continued the pursuit. It was a black night, and in a few seconds both had disappeared. All this had happened in less time than it takes to tell it, and Roger had remained still with surprise, and mute with apprehension. The recollection of Régine came to him more vivid and painful. To run after the beggar was superfluous as Pierre Bourdier was at his heels, so he rushed into the hut. Its door had remained open, but profound darkness reigned under the low roof and within the windowless walls. In the conflict the light had been extinguished, for there could be no doubt that the pedlar had divined what happened.

"Régine, where are you ?" inquired Saint-Senier, forgetting in his anxiety that the poor girl could not hear him; consequently nobody replied to him.

The stillness was lugubrious. Roger groped his way in, his arms extended forward and his steps all caution, for he trembled lest he stepped on her body. His heart beat fit to split his breast, and he shook so much that twice he was forced to lean against the wall to save himself from falling. His hands encountered nothing, and the thought that the dumb girl had been taken out of the hut crossed his mind. It was, indeed, improbable that the urchin would have dared attack her by himself, and maybe some other scoundrels had come to his aid. In his distress of mind, the officer stooped to feel for the lantern, and just as he touched the floor he felt a hand laid upon his arm.

"Alive !" he cried.

It was true. Régine was grasping his wrist as if to inform him by the pressure that she had escaped the beggar's assault. At the same time, a happy chance made his fingers light upon the match-box of which Bourdier had made use. To pick up the lantern and light it was the work of an instant, although the lieutenant's very natural nervousness greatly hampered his actions. As soon as he could take in the scene at a glance, he uttered a cry of joy. The girl was sitting on the stool where he had left her, and

although very pale, she seemed neither hurt nor overmuch alarmed. She passed her hand over her forehead, and stared round her as if awakened from a nightmare. Her garments were in disorder, but that was the only trace of a struggle upon her person. The cabin, however, presented a stranger sight. The straw was scattered and trampled underfoot, the cards, scattered in all directions, seemed to have been thrown about the room ; a few silver coins glittered here and there on the ground. The bag that had contained them must have been roughly snatched away, and the act had no doubt caused it to partly open. One could understand what had occurred on beholding all the results. Excited at sight of the money, and perhaps fancying its amount greater than it was, the young scapegrace had resolved to take it by force. Emboldened by the prolonged absence of the two Frenchmen, he had believed he might easily master a lone woman, and had thrown himself upon Régine. This savage attack did not at all accord with his supposed intentions to play the spy, but the immediate satisfaction of his cupidity must have overborne the remote hope of fingering the blood-money promised by the invaders to the traitor who served them. Besides, to ensure impunity, and a swift flight, he had reckoned on the infirmity which did not allow the girl to call for help.

"Bourdier was right," muttered Saint-Senier, "it is a miracle the little villain did not kill her."

While at ease as to the fate of his friend, the lieutenant felt anxious as to the outcome of the fateful incident. Some course had to be taken straightway, for moments were precious. While trying to read Régine's thought, and inform her that he wished to consult her, he was listening carefully. His brave companion had darted away in pursuit of the beggar, and whether he had caught him or lost his traces in the thicket, he ought to reappear at any moment. Nevertheless, the woods remained silent all around.

"What am I to do ?" pondered the saddened officer.

Never had the situation been more perplexing since his escape from the Saint-Germain Hospital. The dangers he had run on the Chêne-Capitaine clearing were such as a firm heart may brave, but uncertainty often impairs the stoutest courage, and Roger did not know how to decide. Any resolution was perilous in the abandonment in which Pierre Bourdier's absence left him. To await him was to lose time that would be bitterly regretted afterwards, for night was drawing on and the Prussians might come by daylight. To start off through the woods would still have been possible if they were to proceed into Normandy. But, since his new-found friend had spoken of the difficulty of getting back into Paris, Roger's heart was inflamed with the hope of meeting Renée de Saint-Senier again, for he knew her to be exposed to the dangers and privations of the siege. So he was determined to attempt the enterprise and risk life to see his beloved once more. But the chances of success became very improbable without Bourdier's aid, and he trembled at the idea of dragging Régine with him to an almost certain death. Besides, it seemed foolish for him to depart without news of the valuable comrade sent him by Providence, and who had so generously devoted himself by pursuing the traitor through the woods. If he could only have exchanged thoughts with the mute girl, it would have been something, but he was too impatient to talk to her by dumb-show. It was she who came to the rescue. She had recovered that nerve which seldom if ever left her, and none would have suspected on seeing her so steady that she had just escaped shameful violence. The soldier, greatly amazed, beheld her open

the satchel which she had hung again at her girdle, and take out a toy slate on which she scribbled with a piece of chalk. He bent over eagerly and read these firmly traced words :

" We must go."

" Go ! " he repeated painfully, " but, my poor child, there's no knowing where to go."

She raised her large eyes, in which intelligence and resolution shone, rubbed out the words, and under her nimble fingers soon appeared another sentence, which Roger read with amazement.

" We are expected in Paris, and we can be there to-morrow."

" Paris ! " exclaimed the officer. " Why, anybody would say that the witch reads my mind."

He grasped Régine's hand to give it a squeeze.

Paris ! the magic name made him forget everything else, Pierre Bourdier's absence, the terrible dangers of the journey, all were blotted out by this courageous resolve of the girl so plainly expressed.

" Ay, go we will to Paris," he said, enthusiastically, " and we will be there to-morrow, for as heaven has already saved us this evening from the foe, the spies, and the fire—it certainly does not mean that this noble girl shall perish ! "

Régine was already on her feet, and loading herself with her bag, which she had carefully closed up. Roger fastened his pack on his back, and stepped hastily out of the cabin with her, but ere he had passed across the threshold, he stopped short.

XIV.

THE officer had yielded to an impulse of sudden enthusiasm ; but the dreadful realities so weighed on him, that calmness became of absolute necessity. Perchance also, the sensation of sharp cold he felt on entering the outer air, contributed towards recalling the Lieutenant to himself. In any case, he checked Régine, and pointed to the light left burning in the hut. In his haste, he had neglected to put it out, and if left burning it was likely to attract nocturnal wanderers. The beggar boy's visit had had no other cause, and it was important for the fugitives not to leave any traces of their passage. Besides, the Prussians were, perhaps, already on their heels, and the chance that had led them to the clearing of the Chêne-Capitaine, might as reasonably conduct them to this part of the wood.

So Roger darted back to blow out the candle, so untimely re-lit. On finding the remains of the supper strewing the ground, he applauded his thoughtfulness in not neglecting the precaution, and before extinguishing the light, kicked all the accusatory fragments into a corner. This act brought him up against another evidence of people being about, evidence which was much more difficult to make away with.

He stumbled against a large package, much akin to that he carried on his back, it being the other sham-hawker's pack, deposited there by the owner, and not thought of whilst he ran off in pursuit of the little vagabond. This unexpected find revived all the lieutenant's remorse. He asked himself, very sternly this time, whether he had the right thus to abandon a generous comrade, who had sacrificed himself to deliver them of a dangerous hanger-on. The pack contained the wares and clothes on which Bourdier relied, in order to play his part as an ambulatory trader, and may

be his papers. It was a sacred trust left under the guard of his latest friend, who would, by going away, leave it at the mercy of the next comer.

"No, it shall not be!" he muttered. "This man had confidence in me. If I were to go away without him, I should be a dastard."

Whilst he reflected, Régine also returned into the cabin. She took him by the arm, drew him to the door, and pointed to the sky. A small patch of the celestial dome appeared through the branches of the large trees, and the seven stars of the Great Bear, sparkled with that bright lustre which presages the sharpest frosts. The officer had never made a particular study of astronomy, but he understood the intention. By declining towards the horizon, the constellation indicated to the adventurers that night was advancing, and Régine's gesture signified :

"It is time to start."

"Alas, she knows nothing," sighed Roger; "she did not hear what our brave comrade told me. Who knows that she may not even still distrust him? And how can I make her understand that we owe him gratitude and that he can powerfully contribute towards our being saved?"

All these thoughts crowded upon the lieutenant's brain and perplexed him worse than ever. But the decision he lacked superabounded in Régine, who had not his reasons for wavering as she proved right clearly. Without waiting for a consent which might be slow to come, she picked up the lantern, opened it, took out the candle, extinguished it and tossed it afar in the brush. It was impossible to say more plainly :

"I guess what you ought to do—I do it, and now we must go."

Roger answered merely with a moan. He felt he was vanquished by that manly will whose ascendancy he had already suffered more than once. The generous feeling which prompted him to wait for Pierre Bourdier's return gave way to a kind of superstitious reliance on Régine. She seemed to bring him good fortune, and evidently Providence which had watched over him since his escape, manifested itself in the bold actions of the mysterious girl. Besides, she also was devoted, and at least he owed her as much gratitude as to his chance companion. So he turned to bestow a farewell glance on the miserable hut, where he pictured the poor hawker arriving exhausted by his chase and finding no more the friend on whom he relied.

"After all, though, my departure will not prevent him saving himself," he reasoned. "Who can tell even if he will not get through the Prussian lines more easily than we?"

At the moment when this idea came so opportunely to smoothe his troubled conscience, he believed he caught a distant sound.

"Can it be he returning?" Roger asked himself, as he listened.

After a few seconds' attention, he found that the sound came precisely from the direction in which Bourdier had proceeded. There was some movement in the forest, and near the cabin, for the sound grew more and more distinct. Though Régine could not hear, she displayed much restlessness. She clutched Roger's hand and tried to drag him away. With outstretched neck, he was trying to discover the cause of the dull rumble that roused the echoes in the underwood. It was louder and more regular than the tread of any one runner through the forest. Soon the officer realised that it was the ringing beat of horses' hoofs on the frozen earth. Surely the pedlar could not have mingled with this cavalcade which the listener calculated must be numerous. His practice in warfare soon enabled him to recognise the regular tramp of a cavalry squadron. Doubt was no longer

possible. It was a round of horse soldiers arriving as though it were written that one fugitive should exhaust all the run of ill-luck by successively encountering all the different corps of the German army.

"The die is cast," muttered Saint-Senier between his teeth as he followed the girl, who pulled him by the arm with marked persistence.

In truth it was high time to go. The horsemen had broken into a trot, and it really looked as if they had scent of the fugitives. The girl could not suspect this danger, but her instincts continued to serve her wondrously well, for she had unhesitatingly chosen the best direction to elude the enemy. The latter were evidently keeping to the broad road which the friends had used on leaving the clearing, at the point where their immediate pursuers had been bemired. There was no fear that military prudence would be relaxed to the point of riding into thickets. The most to be feared was that two or three men would dismount to search the bush and inspect the hut, provided that they knew of its existence. The plan to escape them consisted therefore in gaining ground in an inverse direction, providing that no noise betrayed their moves. Roger knew by experience that the enemy had sharp ears, and that it was almost impossible to walk in the night through wooded land without disturbing leaves and breaking twigs. However, the girl had known from the outset how to solve the difficult problem of this fresh departure. After passing the freestone boulder at the foot of which the two Frenchmen had conferred, she had taken a path, the existence of which the officer had not dreamt. Its narrowness did not allow two to walk abreast, and there was the less likelihood of a horseman entering it. But at the same time it was utterly free of all the hindrances commonly encumbering forest paths. No dead branches to snap, no brambles to push aside, and no pebbles to rattle under foot. Walking was as easy, and not more noisy than in a garden-alley. Was it good luck or perfect acquaintance with the ground which led Régine into this road to safety? Roger knew nothing about it, but hope came back to him on seeing obstacles levelled away as they pursued this incredible odyssey. He might have believed that perils fled away before the girl by supernatural influence just as walls open in fairy tales at the wave of a wand.

After a quarter of an hour's quick walking, the fugitives were able to believe themselves out of all danger. They no longer heard the horses' hoofs, so either they had gained ground, or the round had changed its direction. Notwithstanding this, the guide appeared bent on following this new course, for she went forward without stay or turn, even past the numerous crossways that were presented. This was quite different to her course in the first part of the journey. There was no more of the floundering which had sometimes retarded them in reaching the crossway of the Chêne-Capitaine. It was now apparent that she felt herself on her own ground, and was advancing towards a goal predetermined in her mind.

Despite her confidence, Roger could not help making the reflection that at this gait they would soon be out of the forest. Whatever be the length of a winter night, dawn would certainly come at last, and sunrise would coincide with the end of the protective shelter afforded the fugitives by the thickness of the woods. Furthermore, the direction they were following was north-east, as the officer calculated near enough by the North Star. He knew the lay of the land well enough, to realize that by continuing thus, they would finally reach the neighbourhood of Maisons-Laffite.

"What shall we do?" he marvelled, "when we arrive on open ground, where every village is occupied, and the enemy watches incessantly?"

However, as there was no possible hanging back now, Saint-Senier decided to remain passively obedient. Thus they marched on for two hours at the least, when Régine suddenly stopped. They approached the skirt of the forest, for the trees began to stand out on a clearer background. No doubt the girl had reached the halting-place she had fixed upon, for she threw her bag down at the base of an old beech, and motioned her companion to imitate her. Rather surprised at this abrupt decision, the lieutenant began to look around him when he was startled to hear an owl hoot in the branches of the tree.

XV

IN perilous situations, the firmest mind becomes accessible to unreasoning terrors. Roger de Saint-Senier was not superstitious, and yet the mournful cry of the night-bird had caused him a nervous impression for which he would have blushed at any other moment. The screech seemed to him an omen of death. Régine, who naturally remained a stranger to all outer sensations, had already turned her bag into a pillow against the tree trunk. This preparation made, she shook her friend's hand by way of a temporary good-bye, stretched herself on the frozen heather, laid her head on the improvised pillow, and closed her eyes.

Only a few seconds afterwards, her soft and regular breathing betokened that she was soundly slumbering.

This resolution to take rest had been formed, and carried out so promptly, that the officer stood overcome by surprise, and not exempt from distress. He durst not stir—much less try to arouse the girl, but he pondered sorrowfully on the possible outcome of this delay. Day was not very distant, and with it would come other dangers than those of the night-time, less vague, and more serious. By an increase of mischance, the forest ended but a few paces off, as we have stated, and its shelter would fail to combine with night's protective shade in favour of the fugitives. It was hard to select a worse time and place for a halt. Still, he would have reproached himself had he interrupted it, and he was only astonished at one thing, namely that Régine had not heretofore given way to fatigue, and craving for sleep. Six or seven hours' walking, adventures, and terrible emotion, ought to have been beyond the powers of a frail, delicate girl, and slumber becomes, at times, so imperative a need, that it triumphs over all vigour and energy. Despite of this, she had so leisurely made her rough bed, that she seemed merely carrying out a plan formed beforehand. When, broken and spent by mental and bodily ailments, a man succumbs to enervation after great crises, he does not lie, but drops down on the earth. Régine, though, had gone to rest with the methodical coolness of the soldier, who says to himself : "I have one hour before the battle, and I must sleep," and so, sleep he does. This rare gift, which greatly contributes to make men heroes, this command of sleep, was hers, and it served her well in the face of peril. Roger cherished such faith in the good sense and daring of his liberator, that he soon reasoned reassuringly :

" If she stops here, it's because she had settled in her own mind to do so. God guard us, that's all ! "

Putting down his bale in his turn, he opened it to pull out some cloth, which he spread over the sleeper by way of a covering. The frost

had increased as morn came on, and the nipping early breeze was rising. The lieutenant felt a general numbness creep upon him by degrees, and it required all his will not to yield to the intense longing for repose which overwhelmed him. To watch over the sleeping guide was a duty, however, above all corporeal needs, and, moreover, sleep in that icy temperature might be death.

"If I lie down, I am a lost man," he muttered, and he began stamping about to warm himself, running in a ring round the beech as the circulation slowly became restored.

The sharp clatter of his boot-heels upon the frost-bound soil was not to the fancy of the bird perched in the upper boughs, or ensconced in the hollow of the trunk, for once again it sent forth its plaintive note. Whether there were an echo in the forest, or another owl was on the hunt in the vicinity, the hoot was repeated afar off. The practice of bush-fighting had made our officer distrustful, and this nocturnal calling instantly awakened all his suspicions. He was reminded, too, of the time of the First Revolution wars, when the Breton Chouans signalled to one another in the woods by imitating the screech-owl's cry. Yet there was little likelihood that the gardes mobiles of that part of the country, now shut up in Paris, would have crossed through the Prussian lines in order to give a national ballad concert in Saint-Germain Forest. As for the Prussians, hardly fanciful gentry, Saint-Senier knew perfectly well their prescribed rule to issue words of command by the whistle, and he could not ascribe this interchange of calls.

He raised his eyes in a weary fashion, and descried absolutely nothing in the leafless tree-top, consequently little adapted for hiding a watcher. On the other hand, in this rapid inspection of all above ground, he perceived that the trunk was covered at a fair height with withered wreaths, grass-shaded medals and faded nosegays, which the piety of wayfarers had hung beneath a statuette of the Virgin. The quantity of these *ex-votos* made him think that the spot enjoyed particular notoriety, and that a pilgrimage, founded on some pious tradition, must attract a goodly throng there. Régine had shown such undeniable knowledge of the woods this night that the lieutenant was confirmed in the idea of the halt being an intentional choice. The girl had, in all probability, her own reasons for having stopped to sleep at the foot of this tree remarkable among all others. He tried to divine these reasons as he continued his round, but at last he heard the disagreeable screech anew. It was not the owl near-at-hand which thus gave voice, but one in a dense thicket, on the same side as before, but nearer. Nothing replied to this call; in the beech all remained silent. The officer inferred that the vile bird had flown away, and he was not sorry to be relieved of this funereal song, which disturbed his meditations and irritated his nerves. From time to time he stopped to throw a glance upon Régine, and question the eastern sky. The girl had gone off so speedily into deep sleep that she had not made a movement. Her lithesome body was lying motionless under the strip of cloth, and her faint, even breathing just lifted the woollen folds, as though to reveal that her stillness was not that of death. As for the horizon, it did not lighten, to Roger's great gladness, but he felt anxious as to the time. In making him prisoner, the Prussians had relieved him of his watch, which the starry dial but very imperfectly replaced.

These were the longest winter nights, and still he feared that the peep of day would not be long delayed. After leaving Saint-Germain just before

midnight, the fugitives had lost a very great deal of time by the many tribulations they had encountered, and daylight would certainly surprise them just outside the forest.

"If I only had that brave secret-messenger beside me, I would not care," said the lieutenant in an undertone. "I could have his opinion on the place where we are, and on our road, and I am sure he would be of great assistance to me. Who knows what has become of him?" he added, fearing that the hateful little beggar may have lured him into some snare.

His monologue was interrupted by a screech of the night-owl, which had sensibly drawn nearer, but the mate on the beech-tree, if still there, persisted in maintaining silence.

"What can draw the other bird here?" wondered Roger, becoming suspicious again.

Unmeaning to a townsman, the fact of the wary night-bird coming towards a man, despite the sound of his footsteps, had much import for the lieutenant, who had spent his boyhood in the woods of Saint-Senier. The hooting was renewed at less than a minute's interval, but this time he believed he could distinguish some notes in the very successful imitation, which appeared to him due to the human voice. Things were getting serious, and the officer deemed it prudent to stop his stroll. He thought for an instant of rousing Régine, but he reflected that, in event of a fight, she would be of no avail, and that he had better let her sleep if it were a false alarm. So he set his back to the tree trunk, so as not to be taken in the rear by surprise, and to face the danger, if there should be any. In this well-chosen defensive position, he stood still, with his eyes fixed before him.

This beech-tree, sheltering him and the slumbering girl, rose alone in a group of thinly-scattered saplings. On the side to which the watcher was turned, the high, dense thicket came up to fifteen paces or so of the tree. Accordingly, if an enemy came that way, he might easily creep up through the underwood remaining almost to the last moment unseen. Whilst our officer deplored this strategetic disadvantage, the hooting recommenced at so short a distance that he could not help starting. In reality, he still doubted its being a man, for the reason that one wishful to take another unawares, would not announce himself thus noisily. If the signal had been repeated like the first one from the tree-top, such reciprocal calls would have been explained, but silence continued over Saint-Senier's head.

"I'm mistaken," he muttered, "it's some frightened owl trying to get a clue from its mate as to its hole."

The hour was late, and it was now full time to awaken Régine. He was just about leaving the trunk against which he leaned his back, when a rapid rushing sound made him lift his eyes. At the same instant a pair of feet came down on his shoulders.

XVI.

UNEXPECTED sensations are always sharper at night-time. Obscurity is an unknown land, and the man who might show a bold face to a palpable, visible danger, will shudder under the influence of the vague horror born of shadows. At the sudden contact of the man's feet, Roger felt chilled with affright, albeit he was a valiant soldier. Instinctively, despite his

emotion, he bounded forward to escape the weight of this singular foeman, who dropped out of the clouds, and at the same time he turned round to face him. But, quickly as he had wheeled, he was not as quick as his unforeseen adversary. This man who was sliding down the tree, landed on his feet with incredible lightness and caught him by the throat before he could stand on the defensive.

The encounter was so swift and violent that both went rolling on the ground. Unfortunately, Saint-Senier was undermost. He felt a knee put on his chest and a pair of stout hands squeezing his neck. Vainly did he try to repulse his savage aggressor with his fists. He had so little anticipated being attacked in this sudden manner that he was not armed with his pick. The only weapon he possessed was lacking when he most needed it. Hence the issue of the unequal wrestle was not doubtful. The assailant's intention seemed only too clear; he simply aimed at strangling the officer, and very well he was succeeding for Saint-Senier found breath failing him. Already there was a ringing in his ears, the blood flowing to the brain clouded his sight, and his thoughts became confused. For the last time he remembered Régine, whom his death would leave exposed to the violence of a blood-thirsty stranger, who thus murderously fell upon an unarmed man.

Then his fists opened and his eyes closed. Only a few seconds and his suffocation would be complete. Even as he was losing consciousness, he had a dim perception of a shock and a clamour of voices. The pressure crushing his throat was suddenly relaxed, and the air penetrating his lungs, restored to him the life almost flown. There came a moment of indescribable anguish, like the supreme effort of a soul to cling to the frame whence there has been an endeavour to tear it. But it was of short duration. He uttered a deep sigh like a diver coming up to the surface, stretched his arms at random and sat up, urged by the mechanical instinct of self-preservation to resume some fighting posture. It was a useless precaution, however.

On opening his eyes to look round, Roger beheld two men, one kneeling but trying to get up, and the other erect, pulling the former by his collar. To all seeming the new-comer was a heaven-sent ally who had prevented the man out of the tree from finishing his cruel work. The miraculously rescued lieutenant wondered who this was, his ideas being still too confused to furnish a solution of the problem. The gloom did not allow of his distinguishing the new-comer's features, but a voice that he believed he recognized, struck his ear.

"I was just in the very nick of time," observed the friend in need in an almost joking tone.

"Rather, old mate," responded the strangler, "you just did drop in to time, if you want to save this chap's life. One second more and I fancy he would have been at the last kick."

"Well, my dear comrade," went on the stranger, now addressing Roger, "how do you feel?"

"The packman!" exclaimed the officer, who had fully recognized his friend of the forest hut.

"The very man, and ever at your call."

"Then help me to knock over this brutal assassin," said the vanquished man, as he succeeded in getting on his legs.

"Who do you mean? old Sarrazin?" inquired Pierre Bourdier, laughing.

"The villain meant to kill me," continued Roger, advancing on the wild man of the woods with clenched fists.

"There's some error, captain, a big error," said the messenger from the Loire army. "Old Sarrazin, whom I now beg to present to you, is a friend, and a regular sound one, too."

"A friend who took me by the throat," growled the lieutenant.

"He did wrong to squeeze you so hard, but I promise you it was with a good intention."

"I don't understand," said Roger, drily.

"The fact is, this must seem queer to you at the first glance, but I will clear off the fog for you."

"And do it at the double-quick, if you don't mind," interrupted Sarrazin, "for I don't care to loaf about here."

"Don't fret, it won't take long," rejoined Bourdier.

The lieutenant listened to this dialogue in stupor, tempted at times to believe that he was dreaming.

"Look here, captain," went on the sham hawker, "you may readily think that I don't travel about with despatches without taking precautions. I have friends all around and stopping-places marked along the road. When you met me in the hut, I knew that this good mate was awaiting me here, and here I should serenely have conducted you had not that cursed imp dropped in to disturb our plans."

"And so," said Roger, beginning to understand, "you had an appointment at the foot of the tree?"

"Just so, and it's a fine bit of luck that you were led here, for I feared I had lost you, and, without blowing my own trumpet, I believe you would have had some trouble to get out of this fix by yourself."

The lieutenant could not help colouring up to think he had abandoned this very friend whose return had saved him.

"By the way, how's the little lady getting on?" inquired Bourdier, lightly.

"Here she is, sleeping; but I was going to rouse her to start off again when I was pounced on by this fel—this man," rejoined Lieutenant de Saint-Senier, who still bore his conqueror a grudge.

"Come, come, all goes well," cried the secret messenger, rubbing his hands. "Now we'll have her up, and we'll be off at full speed, for daylight will break in an hour's time."

"I haven't got over it," muttered the officer, "and I cannot yet believe I am alive."

"Ha! old Sarrazin has a mighty hard grip," said Bourdier, laughing heartily.

"But let me know why he fell on me without knowing that I was an enemy," said the officer, testily.

"Oh, I shouldn't ha' done anything to ye if I had not heard friend Bourdier coming up," remarked Old Sarrazin in a rough voice.

"How's that?"

"That's right enough," the mock hawker took up. "You must understand, captain, that this fine fellow who was on the look-out in the tree clearly saw you at the foot below him. As long as he was alone, he did not budge; but when I signalled to him that I was coming, he thought that you had perhaps posted yourself there to waylay me, and that I should walk into the wolf's maw, as the saying goes. So he dropped on you without more ado."

"At any risk!" added old Sarrazin, easily.

"So, the owl's hooting—"

"I'm one of the owls, captain," said Pierre Bourdier. "Acknowledge that I imitate the call pretty fairly, eh?"

"I was completely deceived."

"You are not the only one, and I have taken in the Prussians many a time like that. It's an old trick my dad taught me. He came from Morbihan, and had done a little poaching in his time, which proves that knowledge is never thrown away."

"But there was also an owl in the branches aloft, and—"

"My crony, Sarrazin, of course! He wanted to warn me that he was at his post, but he stopped the calling to let me know that I must be on my guard. If you had not been there, he would have sounded the call three times instead of once. Neatly arranged, what do you think?" asked Bourdier, who had, indeed, some reason to congratulate himself.

"Marvellous!" ejaculated the heir of the Saint-Seniers, "with you, I may yet hope to get into Paris."

"Now that we have met my old friend, you can be easy. You will know him better to-day, and you will see that although he may not be as clever as me in doing the screecher, he is worth three of me for dodging the Prussians."

"Well, a fellow does his best, you know," modestly remarked old Sarrazin.

"Enough," said Bourdier, "this is not the proper time for paying compliments, I believe we had better issue the order: at the double-quick, march."

"Not one spiked helmet for half a league round; fifty minutes' darkness before us," said the new guide, in the tone of a non-commissioned officer reporting to his superior. "Just the time and chance."

"What about that beggar-boy, who may have gone to inform the enemy?" inquired Saint-Senier, recalling his uneasiness regarding the cavalry around.

"He won't bother us again," laconically answered the pretended hawker.

"What, you don't mean to say you have—"

"I'll tell you the story when we are out of the woods," interrupted Bourdier. "Now, the word is, wake the girl and—and let's be off!"

The request was useless, for Régine suddenly appeared among the three friends.

XVII.

LIEUTENANT DE SAINT-SENIER never wearied of admiring the singular appropriateness which distinguished Régine's actions. She rose, stopped, and walked on with as much timeliness as if she had heard the talk around her. At times one could almost believe her infirmity a feigned one. But the officer had numerous excellent reasons not to carry scepticism so far.

"Look," said Bourdier, "the girl is ready. So we shall not have to rouse her."

She gazed on the new-comers without showing the slightest token of astonishment, as though all the episodes of the eventful flight passed under her eyes, like so many scenes in a pre-arranged play.

Old Sarrazin did not partake of this indifference. From the tree-top, he had witnessed the arrival of the travellers and their preparations for the

halt, though he had but dimly made out their figures, and this was the first time he confronted the girl. As soon as he had seen her appear, he scanned her with a curiosity of which he had heretofore given no proof. Still, he could only discern the outline of her slender, graceful body, for it was not clear enough for him to remark her fine regular features. However, he observed her with a persistent attention which Roger easily noticed. Perhaps he was struck by the style of her bearing, and amazed that a young woman in a country garb should have such a lofty air. This explanation he dwelt upon momentarily, but he concluded that it was crediting the honest fellow with far too much acumen. As well as might be judged in the forest gloom, old Sarrazin looked much like the soldier fresh from the plough seen in Revolutionary prints. Hence, it was quite doubtful that he had enough intelligence to appreciate Régine's superiority. But this gave rise to one disquieting reflection.

"If this rustic remarks it," he thought, "what will happen in case we meet a Prussian officer?"

Bourdier's voice cut short his self-communing. "My boys," he said, "let's speak little and to the point, for time is passing."

"We have already lost a lot," observed Sarrazin.

"Are we far from your place?" inquired Bourdier.

"It's three quarters of an hour off, at a smart pace. Daylight will be on us before we're through."

"Is your mill occupied, then?"

"By five soldiers, two by two taking a turn at watching the bridge. The three off duty pass the night drinking, and the chances are that they'll be under the table when we arrive."

"Capital! Now, are there any inspections in the day-time?"

"Not often, but it does happen."

"And do they study people's passports closely?"

"That depends. There is one fat chap who gabbles a little French and wants to make 'em believe that he can read it. But there's not much trouble in gulling him. Last week he let a messenger from Tours go by who looked no more like a carter, for all his whip and smock-frock, than I do like a bishop."

"The volunteer sent a week before me," remarked Pierre Bourdier.

"Did he get through into Paris?"

"I heard it said he was shot over Argenteuil way," answered old Sarrazin, as simply as if he were talking of an accident to a waggon.

"Ah!" said the sham pedlar with the same unconcern.

"Besides the fat chap," went on the rustic, "there sometimes comes a thin little ferret wearing goggles and a skyblue overcoat, laced on the collar. He is as tricky as a monkey and it's quite a job to take him in."

"We'll do it all the same," rejoined Bourdier. "Only let's get well settled as to how we stand. Have you a passport," he added to Roger.

"No," was the glum answer.

"I suspected as much when you asked me for information in the cabin."

"All this girl could do," replied the lieutenant, "was to procure these clothes and a hawker's pack."

"It would not work; a man who 'does' the fairs never travels without documents."

"You see then that we are destruction to you," said the officer, "and we had a hundred times better part than be your ruin."

"Stuff and nonsense! never!" cried Bourdier, "we shall pull through

somehow. Old Sarrazin will pass you off for a new man and the girl for a servant he has hired at Poissy."

"Maybe we can," said the countryman laconically, not taking his eyes off Régine.

"Then, that's settled. Only you must explain it to the lass, and it can't be easy to do that at night to a person who's deaf and dumb.

"What! is she deaf and dumb?" interrupted Old Sarrazin, much affected.

"Oh, don't be worried about that," said Saint-Senier, "she is so bright that she guesses what she does not comprehend, and I charge myself with fully acquainting her with the state of things."

"Good! show the lead, old Sarrazin," said Bourdier; "we'll keep step with you."

This command ended the conference. The countryman took the head of the little column and went towards the forest border which now clearly showed up, for the dawn was already whitening the sky. They proceeded easterly. Roger followed and Régine walked between him and the pedlar. Whither? the lieutenant knew absolutely nothing about it, for he was not sufficiently acquainted with the country to take a direction after so many windings and he dared not question his new friends. So he let himself float on the current of his destiny and left everything to the great Disposer of life. The girl whose fate was linked with his, could alone have influenced his resolve, and nothing betokened that she wished to turn him from the way open before them. He followed on silently and merely glanced at the country they traversed. The underbrush ceased on the edge of some sloping ground, and on coming out upon this high bank the travellers saw the horizon open before them. Day was gradually coming and a chill fog slowly rolled away like a stage-curtain rising. Through the openings, Roger beheld an immense panorama. Before him extended far out of sight the immense plains which followed upon one another as far as Paris. On his left, a range of hills extended into the distance towards the north-east. On the other hand, he recognised Mont Valérien whose summit was crowned by the white smoke of a morning cannonade. At the base of this natural terrace flowed the Seine, separating two large villages built almost facing each other.

"That's Maisons-Laffitte, and over the bridge is Sartrouville," said Pierre Bourdier, pointing to the buildings which stood as yellow patches on the dark plain.

"Are we going there?" quickly asked Roger, rather surprised at such a choice of road.

"No, no, we should fall smack into a Prussian division."

The lieutenant looked for a point which agreed with the direction followed by the guide, but the sham hawker had to extend his hand to show him a group of islets at their feet.

"Behold the castle of Sultan Sarrazin," said he, laughing.

On looking more attentively the soldier saw a red roof rising through the mist, the house being built on piles in the middle of an arm of the Seine. Beyond doubt it was a mill, and its isolated site made it well adapted for concealing travellers interested in avoiding observation. Sartrouville rose on the other riverbank some hundreds of yards up stream. Below, the banks seemed utterly deserted.

"We shall be there in ten minutes," added Bourdier, "and then we shall have all day to rest, and this evening we'll risk playing for the big stakes."

Roger thereupon noted a detail that had escaped him in the darkness. The pretended packman had his pack on his back, so that he must have found time and a chance to return into the cabin to secure possession of his indispensable burden. The lieutenant's remorse was so far appeased, as he no longer had to reproach himself for having left his companion in the lurch ; but he could not help admiring this man's inereditable presence of mind which let him forget nothing though amid all kinds of dangers. Old Sarrazin had begun striding down a steep path, which conducted straight to the mill. Roger could examine him at his ease on their way. He was a fine old fellow, approaching his sixtieth year, but hard and upright as a poplar. Notwithstanding the sharp cold, he carried his wide brimmed hat in his hand, and his short cropped grey hair left his bull neck bare. He seldom turned round, so that the lieutenant could not well see his sunburned face, but he admired the squareness of his shoulders, and was no longer astonished at the vigour he had displayed under the beech-tree. Not a human being showed himself on the slope they descended, or on the river shore. The Prussians, trusting to the watch kept up by their patrole in the forest, no doubt abstained from guarding the Seine bank thereabouts. Moreover, it was almost impossible to cross over elsewhere than by the Maisons bridge, as all the boats had been confiscated.

"I spy my lad at the mill doorway," said old Sarrazin. "That means the Prussian inspector is there."

"I hope it isn't the spectacled ferret," muttered Pierre Bourdier.

Throughout the journey, Régine had not once departed from a purely passive demeanour. She tramped along, bent by the weight of her bag, without looking around her. She hardly lifted her eyes when they arrived in sight of the mill. Still, she seemed to anticipate all the events forthcoming, and Saint-Senier, who knew that could not be, understood nothing more of such indifference. There were moments when he would fain believe in a weakening of the intelligence of which she had given so many proofs. Pierre Bourdier and miller Sarrazin had quite other things on their mind. The sequel of a complicated enigma was at hand, and it was high time to collect themselves before springing into the final terrible difficulties.

"It's settled, eh, old friend ?" said the seerct messenger to his comrade. "You went after a man and a maid on the other side of the wood, and you met them on the road."

"Hard to get that tale swallowed," said the miller, curtly.

"Why ?"

"On account of the lass being dunib."

"You can put her off as a relation of your late lamented wife, whom you took in out of charity."

"All right ; besides we have no time to hunt up other excuses ; and, besides, if it's the fat head, he won't be particular."

"You hear that, comrade ?" remarked Bourdier to Lieutenant de Saint-Senier.

"Yes, and I shall do my best."

"Speak as little as you can, and let me do the jawing."

This rapid exchange of remarks had brought the party to the Seine and the mill was before them. Built on a wooded islet, it was separated from the bank by a very narrow channel, over which was thrown a rough plank passageway. The wheel was stopped, and the clear click clack which so gleefully accompanies the work of the stones had ceased. The river was strewn with large bits of ice but it had not frozen yet, and its yellowish

waters noisily splashed among the piles. In the middle of the bridge a stout, puffy young man in a woollen cap and a grey jacket was quietly smoking a pipe. He had folded his arms, and raised his nose sniffing like a philosopher who little fretted about the events of this world, and though he certainly had perceived his master and the others, he no more stirred than a statue.

"Hallo, Jacquot!" hailed old Sarrazin, "anything new in the mill?"

"Nothing, master," replied the man, with a most thorough Norman accent.

"How about the spiked helmets?" queried the miller, lowering his voice and advancing on the bridge.

"They have been under the table since last night, but the old rogue has just turned up."

"Bad luck!" muttered Sarrazin.

"It's the weazel in goggles, eh?" said Pierre Bourdier.

"Just so."

"Open your eyes and shut your mouths," resumed the pretended hawker, by way of collective recommendation.

"Where is he at this very moment?" inquircd the miller, pushing Jacquot before him.

"He asked after you, so I told him you went yesterday over towards Achères and would be back in the morning. That set him snarling and he went out prowling over the island till you came."

"Good! Let us in quick," said the miller, still at the head of the little procession, "if he does not get back too soon, it will work all by itself."

The mill door was at a few paces from the bridge. Old Sarrazin pushed it gently, and ushered in his guests, motioning them to step warily. When Jacquot, who brought up the rear, had closed the primitive portal, the adventurers found themselves in a low room, into which came a subdued light from a single window. In the middle, a long table stood on the earthen floor, loaded with empty bottles and glasses, and lit by a tallow candle flickering in a bottle candlestick. Guns, sword-bayonets, and belts, deposited in a corner, testified to the presence of soldiers, but nothing was visible of their outstretched forms save the soles of their boots on the top of their flat undress-caps. Jacquot had not slandered the Germans; they were napping under the table. They were three in number, as well as could be deciphered by the entanglement of feet and heads, and their sonorous snores proved that there was nothing to fear from them, at least for the moment. Old Sarrazin took in the scene at a glance, the farthest nook being familiar to him, and having thus assured himself that no enemy beheld him he said curtly:

"The lady and gentleman to the Blue Room."

He supplemented this injunction with a gesture which directed Roger's eyes to a movable ladder-like flight of steps which conducted to a hole in the wall a dozen feet above.

"Show 'em up," he said to Jacquot, "and shut the trap door afterwards."

Disconcerted by this abrupt decision, the lieutenant showed signs of hesitation although Régine had already set foot on the bottom step, but Bourdier whispered in his ears:

"It's the safest way on account of the girl. Do it and don't stir until I come to let you out."

Roger bowed to the advice and followed the miller's man, who climbed the stairs before the girl with an agility which so stout a fellow would hardly

have been credited with. Once above, he saw that the square gap was the entrance of a long lobby which he boldly crossed in his guide's steps, with the show-girl following. Through the chinks of the disjointed planks over which they walked, the officer perceived the mill stones and hopper. Hence he was above the mill properly so called, and he was wondering where this road conducted them when the man stopped and laid his hand on the partition. One board turned on a pivot at once and disclosed the entrance to a long narrow room.

"Pack yourselves in there and don't budge," said Jacquot laconically.

There was nothing to do but obey at once and the lieutenant asked no repetition of the orders. He made Régine pass first, and had scarcely stepped upon the boards within the refuge before the trap-door was closed on him. To his great surprise, the place was not dark although deprived of windows. In the middle of the ceiling a sky-light of thick ground glass let in some wintry rays. This novel hiding-place contained a bed furnished with blue serge curtains, three or four old arm-chairs in Utrecht velvet and a deal table. The walls were made of ill-joined boards, and by the hollow sound heard as they walked about, the lieutenant understood that he was in an annex fastened like a cage against the outer wall of the house. Régine evinced neither emotion nor surprise, and her companion even believed he could read on her countenance an expression of restrained joy.

She laid down her bag, shook Roger's hand after he also had relieved himself of his burden, sat in one of the arm-chairs and closed her eyes.

"She's overcome with fatigue," thought the officer, who took care not to disturb her sleep.

He made the circuit of the chamber on tiptoe, and remarked, not without astonishment, that it had been recently inhabited. Cigar ends were lying in the corners, a pipe had been left on the table, and an empty cup which seemingly had contained coffee, testified to the recent presence of a male tenant. A cavalry sword and two fencing-foils hanging on the wall over a cross of the Legion of Honour, probably belonged to the master of the house, who had the appearance of an old soldier. Saint-Senier asked himself with some uneasiness if his captivity would be of long duration, and how his new friends would manage to get rid of the Prussians. He did not dare even think of the sequel of the thorny adventure in which he was engaged. His life and the show-girl's were in the hands of those who had offered to save them. He resigned himself to endure everything and dare everything in order to see Rénée de Saint-Senier again. However as he was calling up the image of his fair cousin, a sound of well-known voices came up to him. On stepping nearer to the partition to make surer whence it proceeded, he discovered that the boards were bored with holes, and from these peepholes, he could both see and hear what went on in the large room where he had left his guide. So he looked and he listened.

XVIII.

THE miller and the sham pedlar were conversing with a personage whom the watcher had no pains in recognizing, though he had never seen him before. The description given of him before their arrival at the mill was of rare accuracy. Though he wore an uniform and a laced collar too, this person had no military bearing, and a man must have been credulous indeed to believe he was a Prussian officer. The lieutenant had seen enough travel

on the banks of the Rhine to know that the gentleman in the sky-blue coat was merely one of the civil functionaries who swarmed in the rear of King William's army. The invasion of 1870 had this novelty, that the fore-sighted Prussians brought along with them a force sufficient to rule and govern the conquered districts. Their financiers could have taught many a wrinkle to the local tax-gatherers. Naturally the police service was largely represented in this horde of non-combatants, and the fighting men never moved, without being preceded and surrounded by scouts and spies. The examiner of Roger's two friends belonged to the honourable class of officially acknowledged detective agents and, as such, was charged with watching the Seine near Maisons. As old Sarrazin had stated, he was short, thin, and adorned with spectacles upon a pointed nose. The dialogue had only just begun, but was already lively. Lieutenant de Saint-Senier placed himself so that his eyes and ears lost nothing of the scene he gazed at.

"Where did you meet this fellow?" inquired the Prussian, in tolerable French, but a strong German accent.

"Up there, on the road back from Poissy where I went after money owed me for grinding corn."

"Very good! but why did you bring him here? you don't keep a tavern, do you?"

"Yes, I do, for your soldiers," returned the miller in a sulky tone, "for they drink often enough under my roof, and run up a score."

"You will be repaid out of the war indemnity which we are going to impose on France, when we take Paris," said the police agent, majestically.

"Then I shall have a long time to wait."

This reply, which old Sarrazin really could not withhold, displeased the functionary, for he assumed his most offended air in repeating his first question.

"What has this man come here for?"

"To sell me some cloth for my clothes, and my lad's. Can't you see he is a pedlar?"

"Cloth? you can buy all you want at Maisons, at the shop of my friend, Kuntz, who has a splendid stock of Silesian woollens."

"Do you think that I have any money to waste on foreign rubbish? Not me! For five years Pierre Bourdier has been carrying on his little trade round here, and I am at least sure he won't cheat me, whilst your pigheaded 'old clo'sman'—"

"You are wrong, my friend will not sell you things too dear," interrupted the Prussian, who must have had an interest in Master Kuntz's business.

"Maybe so, but I can get along better with my own people."

The packman, who was the subject of this wrangle, had taken no part in it as yet. He was quietly sitting astride a form, and making a cigarette. This struck Saint-Senier, for he had never seen him smoke anything but a pipe, and he remarked every little incident of the scene in which several heads were at stake. He was torturing himself with anxiety as to how the interrogatory would end. The wary manners and wishy-washy language of the cold and methodical detective argued nothing pleasant. Hence the officer bitterly regretted that his host had not profited by the absence of the ferret, as he called him, to hide the pretended pedlar also.

Yet the idea came to him that in facing the questioning the two friends were bent upon diverting the suspicions of this highly-booted

inquisitor. But the parley, only a skirmish so far, soon took a more serious turn. Seeing that he could draw nothing out of the miller, the spy bluntly addressed Pierre Bourdier.

"Well, my fine chap," he said, affecting a hail-fellow-well-met style, "did you do pretty well yesterday at Saint-Germain?"

The trap was rather too plain for the envoy to walk into it.

"I don't know anything about that part, for I come from Poissy," he unhesitatingly replied.

"And where are you going?" was the Prussian's inquiry.

"Faith! I have not yet made up my mind whether to sleep to-night at Maisons or go down to the Herblay bridge. You have a force somewhere about by Pontoise, and I may do some business with them."

"I think you had better come and talk with my friend Küntz—you'll see how he will buy up your goods."

"Well, I don't know that I mind," observed the pretended pedlar, although Sarrazin grumbled between his teeth:

"Indeed he will buy 'em up, for a certainty, but when it comes to paying for 'em—"

"I suppose, my man, that you have a passport?" said the detective without seeming to hear the miller's reflection.

"As to that, I beg you to believe so, for without one, I should have been caged long ago. Since I left Evreux, I have had it asked for about a dozen times every week."

"Do you object to showing it to me?"

"Oh! dear no," responded the messenger, taking a worn wallet from his vest pocket and tranquilly handing it to the commissary.

Things were getting ticklish, and the mute witness of this stringent inspection now progressing, thought, not without fear, that Pierre might not have had time to get rid of his despatches before the investigator had come upon him.

"If this rogue has him searched, he's a lost man," he said to himself.

Bodily resistance was indeed not even to be thought of, for the soldiers who had been sleeping off their wine underneath the table, began to revive from their stupor, and to say nothing of those on duty on the island, these were satellites fully disposed to lend a hand to the gentleman with the goggles. The lieutenant saw them stretch and heard them distinctly yawn under the table.

"Bourdier, Pierre," the detective spelled out on the paper, "going to Beauvais, both the seals of the *commandature* are on it. Humph! you are quite right," he said, returning the pocket case.

Roger breathed again.

"Still," went on the ferret, "I should like to see what there is in your pack. A pure formality, you know."

"Just as you like," said the sham hawker, at once unstrapping the heavy bundle.

"He has certainly not hidden his papers there," thought Saint-Senier, rather encouraged by the turn the inspection was taking.

It went on, however, with a thoroughness which did honour to the searcher's qualifications as a detective. Forgetting the dignity which his silver lace imposed on him, he went down on his knees and helped Bourdier to turn out the haberdashery: pieces of cloth and cotton, red and yellow handkerchiefs, were unfolded, then shaken and turned every way. The messenger from the Army of the Loire lent himself with the utmost

willingness to this enforced rummaging, which he enlivened from time to time by saying :

"I say, old Sarrazin, here's some Montauban stuff that ought to be just what you want." Or, "Look here, old man, this 'kerchief will come in nicely for your niece at Corbeil."

He went on so naturally with his chaff that Roger could not tell whether to praise his coolness or readiness of wit the most. The verification was carried to the end with a care which custom-house officers would have commended.

"Now, my good fellow," said the Prussian, when it was over, "I should like to examine your clothing—another pure formality—and your shoes also—hence, I must ask you to—"

"To come out as father Adam," interrupted the pretended pedlar without wincing. "It isn't warm, but I know well enough that it's a custom in time of war."

A shudder ran through Lieutenant de Saint-Senier's veins as he saw Bourdier pull off his blouse.

"It will not take long," apologized the spy in a honied tone.

"Just let me fire up with a cigarette—that will warm a fellow a little," said Bourdier banteringly, as he pulled a packet of tobacco out of his pocket and a book of cigarette papers from which he tore a leaf.

"Pass me that book!" said Herr Ferret, whose little eyes twinkled behind the glasses of his spectacles.

XIX.

"It's only some cigarette paper I bought at Rouen," said Bourdier as he held out the book to the German.

But Saint-Senier, who did not miss a single detail of the scene, fancied he noticed a slight trembling of his hand and a fading of the colour on his weather-beaten checks. At the same instant, the miller rose off the stool where he had been sitting, and took a step forward, his hand thrust under his blouse and his contracted features wearing an ominous expression. But the man in spectacles saw nothing at all of this. He had taken the cigarette papers and was scrutinizing them minutely; he parted every leaf, held them up to the light, ruffled them, and finally sniffed them, as though he hoped to find something of a very compromising nature in them. Whilst he was engaged in this operation, the messenger, from the Army of the Loire, was finishing the rolling up of the leaf he had detached, and when he had expertly manufactured a full-sized cigarette, properly twisted at one end and tucked in at the other, he stuck it between his lips and began hunting for matches in his pocket.

"Would you like me to make you one?" he coolly asked the spy, after giving old Sarrazin a deliciously expressive wink.

"No, thanks, I only smoke pipes," grumbled the Teutonic official, who seemed sorely disappointed at not having found anything.

"Good gracious, you never imagined that I had anything stowed away in those papers, did you?" exclaimed the pedlar.

"No, but I like to see everything when I make an examination. You French fellows are so cunning that I am always mistrustful," responded the Prussian.

The functionary ended by returning the cigarette papers to the pedlar who put them in his fob, saying :

"Oh, yes, you're afraid of letters and despatches ! I've heard that fellows sew them up in the lining of their clothes ; but, bless you ! there's no fear of my going into that trade—I am too jolly fond of my skin."

Whilst speaking, he took his cigarette out of his lips and held it between his finger and thumb.

"You are right, my friend," said the spy softly ; "if I were to find even three lines of correspondence on you, I should be obliged to send you to the commander at Maisons, and he would have you shot."

"Oh, catch me putting you to all that trouble, I warrant you !" muttered Pierre the pedlar. "Hallo ! this is nice ! now I've lost my light," he added, sticking the cigarette behind his ear as clerks lay up their pens for a rest.

"You can have your smoke by-and-bye," said Sarrazin, "don't you see you are keeping the gentleman waiting for you to doff your clothes."

"By Jove, that's so—really I had forgotten about that," returned the messenger as naturally as possible, "but it won't take long."

He began to strip, with the methodical slowness of country people.

"This reminds me of the time I had to shew myself to the medical officers before the conscription," he said with a chuckle. "That wasn't yesterday, though !"

As each garment was removed, the terrible inspector grasped it and submitted it to a rigorous search. Only to see him do this, one could divine that he was born for to play Paul Pry in earnest. His hatched face beamed with malignant glee as he felt the apparel, and he looked like a fox, picking and choosing in a fowl-house. It was all done with a skill and conscientiousness which would have certainly won eulogy from his superiors, if any of them had been near. The pockets were turned inside out, the linings ripped open, the collars and cuffs turned back, and the buttons themselves examined. This course was pursued even with the shoes, which this scrupulous ferreter-out tested with a special bodkin for boring the heels and soles. The pedlar's felt hat had already been the subject of special examination. Roger watched all this with mingled disquiet and surprise. The perfect calmness with which Bourdier yielded to the trial encouraged him as to the result, but still he marvelled by what ingenious device he had kept the secret despatches out of the Prussian's reach.

"I daresay he somehow passed them over to the miller," he conjectured.

Régine still slumbered, and he congratulated himself on the happy chance that allowed her to enjoy a little repose. She would doubtless require all her strength, for their trials were not yet over, and the lieutenant could not imagine how their guide would surmount the difficulties that lay in their way to Paris. But first it was necessary to see how the inspection would end. It was nearly over, and the suspicious agent had nodded to Pierre to imply that he might resume his clothes. He had evidently hoped to find a haul, for he wore the sulky mien of a man who has been disappointed. As for the daring messenger, he put on his things with the same coolness as before, and improved the occasion with jokes which testified to his entire freedom of mind.

"I say, general," he asked laughingly, "aren't you going to stand something to cure the cold you have made me catch ? Ugh ! how cold it is in your shanty, old Sarrazin !"

"You Frenchmen are all jokers," said the ferret, eyeing him under his glasses.

"A fellow must have some fun to make up for the badness of trade."

"Talking of trade, my friend," said the Prussian in a dubious tone, "I

really hope you will come with me to Maisons to do a little business with my friend, Kuntz."

"Faith, I couldn't think of refusing," answered Bourdier; "my gossip, Sarrazin, is in no hurry, and we can strike our bargain as well this evening as now."

As soon as he had his blouse on, he knelt down to do up his pack. Lieutenant Roger was surprised to hear him so readily accept the official's invitation, for the latter was evidently taking him along the better to watch him. At the same time he believed he had noticed a glance exchanged between the two friends. After all, the courier might reasonably have some scheme, and he had given proof enough of his intelligence to be trusted with cutting out enough work for the spy.

"I am ready," said Bourdier, getting his pack on his back.

"Then off we go, my friend," said the Prussian, with an amiable air, which augured nothing good, "only the time to give a little advice to this good fellow."

The miller pricked up his ears at this allusion to himself.

"To begin with, my friend, I have to request you not to give these soldiers anything more to drink."

"That's easy, isn't it?" grumbled old Sarrazin. "When I refuse to do so, they threaten to go and break in the cellar door."

"They are drunkards, villainous drunkards, and I will make my report to the commandant to have them punished to-morrow, when they are relieved."

The stately official added a few words in German to the three troopers who, during the inspection, had succeeded after a fashion in standing up; and then he resumed in French:

"I have also remarked in a walk upon the island that the ferry-rope has not been taken away."

"Well, suppose it hasn't?" said the miller.

"I shall send a squad to remove it, and bring it to the commandant. It will be useful to our pontoon makers; while here, it might help somebody to cross the river."

"Cross a fiddlestick! with what? You took away the boat, and unless a man's a bird or a mouse—"

"In the meanwhile," went on the Prussian imperturbably, "I have set a sentry on the bank with orders to fire on every one who approaches."

The miller snapped his fingers.

"I just tell you to prevent an accident," said the detective with an evil smile.

After this warning which greatly resembled a threat, he spoke a little longer to the soldiers and, pointing out the door to Pierrie Bourdier with ironical politeness, he made him pass before him and stalked forth with a measured tread.

"He's taking him away to prison," thought Roger.

This conjecture seemed infinitely probable, and the prospect of being thrown upon his own devices, had nothing reassuring for the captive. The hiding-place to which he and Régine had been conducted, appeared to be tolerably safe, but the flight of wooden steps leading up to the passage still stood against the wall, and the Prussians might take the whin into their heads to climb it. He even wondered how it came about that the inspector had not had the idea to search upstairs himself. Besides, they would have to come out of concealment sooner or later, and the

means of doing so was not imagined by the officer. An hour went by as he sorrowfully brooded over the consequences of this adventure, and alternately looked at Régine, who had not yet awakened, and then into the low room where Sarrazin went to and fro among the soldiers, who had lit their porcelain pipes and were moodily puffing away. The lieutenant was eager to know what had become of the miller's fat assistant when he saw him appear at the mill door. He was shoving before him a tattered lad whom Roger immediately recognised.

XX.

"THE beggar boy of the hut!" muttered Saint-Senier.

It was, indeed, he, a little dirtier and a good deal more ragged than on his first appearance, but still having the same lachrymose and hypocritical visage.

"Whatever are you bringing us here?" sharply demanded old Sarrazin, who was in a bad humour since Bourdier had been marched away.

"A tramp I found sitting at the end of the bridge," replied the miller's man; "he said as how he was hungry and didn't know where to sleep."

"That's no concern of mine," grumbled worthy old Sarrazin. "I should be eaten out of house and home if I harboured all the vagabonds crawling about the country."

"Oh, my kind gentleman," said the boy, in his lamentable voice. "Have pity on a poor unfort'nit little boy, who hasn't had nothing to eat these two days."

"You don't belong round here, eh?" queried Sarrazin, a whit mollified.

"No, master," returned the snivelling mendicant, "I come from Normandy."

"Hallo, that's my part," observed the complacent Jacquot.

"Well, then, why the deuce didn't you stay in Normandy?"

"The wicked Prussians b-b-burnt our houses," blubbered the lad, not without casting a sidelong glance on the pipe-smoking soldiers, who did not meddle in the colloquy.

"The little devil relies on their not understanding French," muttered Roger, who knew what foundation there was for the new spy's pretended woes.

"And what about your parents?" inquired the miller, visibly affected.

"My papa has gone for a soldier, and my m-m-mother, they took her off to prison," said the horrid little cheat, wiping his perfectly dry eyes.

"Come, come, little chap, stop crying, and tell me where you came from and what you want."

"I came from near Gisors, begging my way, and I am going straight on anywhere, till I find som'at to do to earn my daily bread."

"And what can you do?"

"I used to mind the cows down our way, but I could work in a mill, too, all the same."

"No good!" said Sarrazin, after a moment's thought; "the stones are not working, and I haven't enough for Jacquot to do, but it shall not be said that I let the son of a soldier die of hunger at my door."

"If he keeps him here we are ruined," muttered Roger, biting his fist as he heard all this.

"Take him to the cupboard and give him a thick slice of bread and something to drink," said the miller to his man.

"Oh, thank yon, my kind gentleman," whined the beggar, following Jacquot, who appeared to share his master's tender mood.

Through all this the garrison had not stirred, but as soon as the man and the lad disappeared, they passed a few remarks among themselves while smoking, which remarks Roger unfortunately could not understand. As for old Sarrazin, he wore the satisfied air of one who had done a good action, as he tranquilly cleared away the bottles drained by his imposed guests. Never from the moment of his breaking out of bondage, had the lieutenant been so perplexed. The dangers were nothing to the present ambiguous situation. He saw the peril but could not do anything to parry it. Old Sarrazin had never seen the little knave, and consequently he was far from suspecting his perfidious projects. Roger knew that it was certain that the little beggar had solicited shelter in order to perpetrate some treachery at the mill. One word to the miller would suffice to put him on his guard against such intentions; but how tell him that word? To call out was not to be dreamt of, for his hiding-place was too near the room occupied by the Germans, and the least sound would travel far through the flimsy partitions of this wooden house. He was forced, therefore, to wait till some one came to let him out, and who could answer for it that the chance would soon present itself? Thus was he condemned to inertia in presence of an imminent and dreadful danger, and it went hard to resign himself.

Mortally uneasy and weary of watching the soldiers who never quitted the main room, he left the peep-hole and turned to the girl. She continued to sleep soundly, and long did the young gentleman view her before deciding to arouse her. Her bewitching head was hanging on her shoulder and her parted lips showed her snowy teeth as in a smile. She was hardly heard to breathe, and but a faint breath raised her plain bodice at irregular intervals. It was quite like a child's slumber.

"Little does she dream that death is so near," mused the lieutenant.

Perchance it was her last sleep, and it seemed useless cruelty to disturb her.

"She will learn soon enough what misfortunes menace us," he murmured, as he went away on tiptoe.

As he felt exhausted with fatigue, he laid himself softly on the bed at one end of the blue room, and pondered on their strange position. The mendicant's sinister appearance was inexplicable. Bourdier's brief answer when asked about the little scamp, had led him to believe that they were rid of him forever. How had he come back then, and what fatal chance had brought him to the very mill where the fugitives had found shelter? In this deadly concourse of circumstances there was enough strangeness to vex the firmest mind, and the forced departure of the pedlar was not calculated to soothe it. Roger concluded, nevertheless, that Providence had not totally cast them off, since the betrayer, had he arrived an hour sooner, would have met with the pretended hawker, and would not have failed to denounce him on the spot. But the existing alternative was none the less terrible. Indeed, if Pierre Bourdier returned, he would performe run up against the vagabond, and if he did not, the finish of the journey became very problematical. The lieutenant knew neither the route nor the means to overcome the obstacles still separating them from the long yearned for goal. He vaguely knew that the Seine would have to be crossed at least twice, and therein lay the first difficulty, for he could hear the dull

rolling of the waters from his bed. The island on which the mill was situated was very narrow, and, on trying to form an idea of the position of his hiding-place, Roger thought that the main arm that parted him from the right bank would be pretty near.

"That's the way we must fly," he murmured, "but how can we cross a river swollen by the winter rains and guarded by sentinels?"

In vain did he seek a key to this grim riddle, he found none, and he fell into mental torpor by dint of revolving these mournful thoughts in his wearied head. The images of the terrible past, and of the still more dreadful present, blended in his brain, and, at the same time, he felt his physical powers altogether crushed by the weight of immense lassitude. He attempted a struggle against the gradually overwhelming numbness, but fatigue was stronger than his will, and he nodded off, murmuring the names of Régine and Renée. When he awoke, night had come. He opened his eyes at the contact of a hand laid gently on his shoulder. As he had gone off to sleep under fearsome pre-occupation, his first thought was that he had to deal with a foe, and his first movement was to assume the defensive. To rise, leap off the couch, and entrench himself in one of the corners, all these defensive acts took the prisoner only three or four seconds, for, being a military man, he was accustomed to surprises. He had even the presence of mind to remember that the Prussians were at hand, and that he must not cry out. Around him the darkness lay deep, and the silence was complete. One idea flashed through his mind. Perhaps it was Régine who had touched him to let him know that she no longer slept, and that she wanted his orders about moving. He wondered how he was to enter into communication with the poor mute in the gloom. The dumb language would not avail him, and he did not know where to find a light here, even if he durst commit the grave imprudence of lighting anything, for the faintest ray shining through the chinks might betray the secret of the nook.

XXI.

A VOICE, which he did not at first recognise, put an end to his perplexity.

"Tis I," whispered someone.

"Who are you?" challenged Roger, little relieved by this rather vague information.

"Bourdier, of course!" rejoined the voice in the same key.

"The packman!" exclaimed the stupefied lieutenant.

"Oh! not so loud, devil take it! walls have ears here!"

"You are right; but I am so glad to see you again!"

"Oh, it has cost me precious little to procure you this pleasure."

"But how did you manage to escape that prying body?"

"It cost me all my goods, which I gracefully sacrificed to his friend Küntz, the most Jewish of all German Jews; but it's all the same to me, for the time for playing the higgler has gone by, thank God!"

"What! have you given up the idea of getting into Paris, then?"

"Given it up? I hope to be there to-morrow."

"With your dispatches?"

"As a matter of course."

"But did you manage to preserve them in spite of the search? It seemed to me this morning—"

"That Mein Herr Commissary had searched me from head to heel?"

"Yes; I was here and saw it all."

"Pooh!" said Bourdier, chuckling to himself, "I have only one trick in my bag, but it's a prime one."

"You mean you had time to pass the paper over to the miller?"

"Not so; that German weasel sneaked into the mill a minute after you clambered up here."

"But where did you hide it, then, when you were stripped to the buff?"

"You're forgetting my cigarette."

"What! was it—"

"Good gracious, yes! on the particular leaf that I abstracted and rolled up under his eyes and nose there was enough to get me hanged off-hand."

"Then that's the reason you turned pale, as I saw, when he took the book?"

"I don't dispute it: however hardened a fellow gets to such emotions, he feels a touch when at the sticking-point, when the knife has to be used."

"The knife!" repeated the startled officer.

"Knife? yes!" answered the Loire Army courier, tranquilly. "Old Sarrazin, who knows all about the game, was already gripping his larding-pin under his blouse, and if the German had tried to snatch the leaf I was rolling up, he would have stuck him like a mackerel!"

"But the soldiers?"

"Tush? I should have jumped over to their sabre-bayonets in the corner, and I fancy that the pair of us would have made cold meat of the lot; but fighting is always so noisy, that I prefer not being driven to it."

"Heaven has watched over us," muttered Roger, recalling the awful danger he had unwittingly incurred.

"And it will watch over us to the end, be easy on't," proceeded the brave messenger.

"I hope so. I was wondering how we are going to get out of this?"

"Oh, I'll take charge of that. Where is the little lady?"

This question reminded the lieutenant of Régine whom surprise and other feelings had made him forget for the instant. He had left her asleep in an arm-chair, and now was the time to awaken her. But he was not given the trouble to grope for her in the obscurity, for, even as Bourdier was inquiring for her, a squeeze of the hand told her friend that she was by. He could not see her, but he recognised the pressure of her dainty fingers, and let a sigh of relief escape him, for, amid all these unusual events, the idea had struck him for a time that she had fallen a victim to some machination.

"Here she is," he hastened to say, in answer to the query.

"Good! now, do you think she has the strength to go hence with us by a way I am going to show you, which is a little less convenient than the high road?"

"I can answer for her willingness and courage," said Saint-Senier.

"At the best, we have no choice about it," continued Bourdier, "and I will tell you how it is."

"I hear you, and I am ready," replied Roger, simply.

Régine had not made any movement since revealing that she was on the alert, but she still held her escort's hand in hers, as though to say:

"We shall not part in danger."

"My dear comrade," proceeded the pretended hawker, in the curt tone

of one issuing particular orders, "the first step of our night's trip is perhaps the most difficult; we must pass the Seine, which flows on the other side of the mill only a dozen paces off."

"Just what I thought, but I heard that Prussian say that all the boats had been taken away."

"The thing would go as by clock-work if we had only a few hours to spare," pursued Pierre, without stopping at the lieutenant's objection.

"How so?"

"The thermometer has gone down considerably; very likely the river will be frozen over by the morning, and could be crossed dry-shod; but, at present, it is still running, and the broken ice does not close up. Therefore, we must think of something else."

"Another means? there's none, or, at least—"

"There is the ferry-rope which my friend, Sarrazin, sees is kept sound, and that may handily help us across."

"I do not follow you clearly."

"It's simple, though. Stout wrists are needed, and that's why I ask you if you can rely on your little friend's strength. I do not doubt her pluck, but I am not so sure of her grip."

The programme which the army courier so sedately unfolded was of a nature to make the most intrepid reflect, and the aerial road to be followed was not assuredly adapted for young ladies. Appalled by the frightful prospect of exposing Régine to so perilous a course, the lieutenant fell into profound distress. He had not even the resource of consulting his stout-hearted friend, whom he could neither see nor hear, and he was wavering, when a tightening of her grasp came to encourage him as to the point Bourdier had questioned him about, and to remind him most timely that she had never shrunk from any obstacle.

"I—I believe she will try anything," he faltered, "but have you duly thought over the other dangers overhanging us? There are soldiers below here; and out there, the sentinels posted by the commissary on the river bank. I heard him say so—just where the rope passes over."

"Pshaw!" scornfully said Bourdier, "that concerns old Sarrazin and his man. The miller has the liquor department under his charge, and the three spikehelmets not on duty will soon be under the table, where they will sleep till morning. As for the brace of sentries, cold will freeze them up in their shelter-shanty, and Jacquot will look after them."

"But they may be put on the alert," said Roger quickly.

"By whom? There are no traitors here that I am aware of."

"You are wrong—there is one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say that that wretch of a beggar-boy is here."

"Who? the boy that came to the hut?"

"Himself! He came here an hour after you left."

"Ha, the rogue! the rascal!" uttered the packman. "See what comes of my not having smashed the viper when I had him under my heel. If I had twisted the wicked imp's neck instead of gagging him and lashing him to a tree, he would not be here now to spy on us."

"This is like fate dogging us," muttered Roger.

"Did not old Sarrazin drive the young blood-sucker away?"

"He wished to at first, but when he saw him weep, and say he was starved, he bade his man give him something to eat, and shelter him."

"So that he is hanging around here?"

"That's only too certain."

"But Sarrazin, who saw me return, and knows that we are going to run the gauntlet, never told me a word."

"But he does not know that he is a spy."

"Quite true," sighed Bourdier.

Deep stillness succeeded this rapid colloquy. The messenger from the army of the Loire was seeking some method to ward off the consequences of this awkward position of affairs, and Roger was beginning to despair of the success of their escape.

"I have it," suddenly ejaculated the former.

XXII.

"WHAT?" inquired Saint-Senier.

"Why, the way to get out of this place before that imp denounces us," replied the pedlar.

"Good grant it is so!" sighed the unconvinced officer.

"Do you know where old Sarrazin lodged him?"

"No. I was dead beat, and went off to sleep as soon as that rogue was handed over to Jacquot's care, and it was you who awakened me."

"Then, as I fancy I know where they have pccned him, the chances are that he will not see us flitting. And yet it is likely that he will come out to-night for a prowl around the mill, so we must be sharp to outwit him."

"My hope is that it may not already be too late."

"No; it is scarcely seven, the very time when they set the table here."

"They'll have the lad. But are you certain he did not see you just now when you came back?"

"Perfectly sure. You may readily believe that I did not amuse myself by coming in at the big door to show myself to the Prussians."

"But how did you arrive here?" asked Roger.

"From outside. There's a ladder against the wall and the passage has two outlets, like this same chamber."

"Two outlets!" repeated the officer who knew of none but the trap-door by which he had been introduced.

"Why, yes, and you have merely to raise your head to see the one we are going to employ."

"What, that skylight?"

"The same. It seems only suitable for cats but I did not promise you the highway."

"I am ready to follow you anywhere, and so is the girl," said Saint-Senier, somewhat shocked by this language; "but I own that I do not clearly understand your projct."

"You shall. This glazed square opens in the roof of a wooden penthouse added to the mill building."

"I know that much, or guessed it, but—"

"To the edge of this roof," went on Bourdier, "the ferry cable is made fast. We may call it the landing-stage of the passengers by the rope. Do you begin to understand, now?"

Roger did, very well, but he stood dumbfounded at having to attempt such an enterprise, and above all he doubted whether Régine's strength would suffice her.

"However," he objected, in embarrassment, "it will be a hard task, for the mill is not on the very bank."

"Fifteen arm-lengths at most. We are here at the point of the islet, and we have only a very narrow tongue of land to cross. The Seine does not amount to much in width here."

The lieutenant was too deeply enwrapped in thought to answer speedily.

"To counterbalance that, it is deep to be sure," ironically added Bourdier, who rather mistook the cause of Roger's silence.

"A fall would be death," said the lieutenant.

"Listen sir," said the mock pedlar abruptly, "I do not want to drag you with me by force, and if any mishap befel you or the little lass I should reproach myself all my life. So you are free to follow or to stay."

"But you?" queried Roger, timidly.

"It's another matter as regards me. I must arrive in Paris to-morrow morning or I die to-night; but you, who are not carrying despatches, have not the same reasons as I have for risking your life. This is why, if the spirit does not move you, I advise you to sleep away quietly here. To-morrow morning old Sarrazin will give a look into the blue room, you will tell him how you stand, and I daresay he will find some means to get you through into Normandy."

The lieutenant's dilemma was painful. He had to choose between an almost certain and immediate death and a long series of perilous adventures. Alone he would not have debated, but the idea of danger to Régine chilled his courage.

"Under any other circumstances," resumed Bourdier more gently, "I would throw up my design so as to keep you company and try again to be useful to you, but my duty says go."

These simple words profoundly stirred Saint-Senier.

"After all," continued the brave messenger, "it was chance brought us together and we can quit each other without any blame. If I die on the journey, I shall always have the consolation of having rendered some service to a French officer."

This was too much to bear and the lieutenant could not hold out against the remembrance which Pierre Bourdier had evoked. He thought of the events in the forest, and cast afar any idea of severing his fortune from his companion's. One final scruple restrained him and he wished to consult Régine, although his heart told him that the heroic girl was ready to go with him. But the decision was so grave that he still hesitated. A fresh pressure of the poor dumb girl's hand came to sway him. He took her silent clasp for a manifestation of the heavenly will and he said in a steady tone :

"I won't drop you! we'll go together!"

"That's the right talk!" cried Bourdier. "I knew right well you would come."

"Tell me what's to do," said Roger firmly, who recovered all his coolness now the course was taken.

"You'll see."

The messenger from the army of the Loire set to work without delay. To reach the skylight, some elevating stage was needed, though the ceiling was low. The table and an armchair supplied it. With infinite caution, he set the latter on the former and, notwithstanding the darkness, constructed the scaffold without the least noise.

"Behold the stairs," said he, gaily, "and I will show you the way..

Only as I suppose that friend Sarrazin has not dared to risk sending you your dinner, I do not want you to sail without a shot in the locker, as sailors say."

He clapped into Roger's hand a large square of chocolate and a full brandy flask.

"Share with the lass and eat on the road—but first drink a sip of this old cognac."

The lieutenant did not require pressing. He felt that he needed the stimulant. Régine herself did not refuse the flask offered her but drank a little brandy bravely as if to make him understand that she meant to play the man. Still one remonstrance was ventured by the officer.

"By advancing the hour of departure," he asked, "do you not fear to upset the worthy miller's arrangements! he may have settled to help us later on, and—"

"Likely enough, but we shall do without him. The main thing is not to give that infernal imp time to spy on us."

"How are we going to carry our packs?"

"You will not carry them."

"But if we are arrested?"

"If we are, we shall be shot, lieutenant," said the secret courier with perfect serenity, "but we shall not be arrested. Look you! within the Prussian lines, a man may play the pedlar, but, beyond, such a dodge is of no use, and we have too far to travel this night to burden our shoulders."

"I believe you are right," said Roger, perceiving that it was time to burn his ships.

"Now," said Bourdier, climbing on the table, "I am showing you the way. Help the lass up after me, and follow next."

The lieutenant took Régine's arm to notify her whilst the agile fellow attained the second of his improvised steps. As soon as he was on the chair, he shot back the bolt of the skylight frame, and held it so as to lower it very gently. The sky gleamed clear and was brilliant with stars. In a few seconds, Bourdier hoisted himself upon the roof, hung down over the opening and said in an undertone :

"Up with the girl!"

Régine had divined what was to be done, for she was standing upon the table before her cavalier could aid her. The rest of the ascension was accomplished without noise or hindrance. When the officer, closing the line, arrived on the roof, he found his companions reclining side by side and required no warning to imitate them. They were together upon a sloping platform of the same dimensions as those of the Blue Room.

"Don't move," whispered Pierre, "I am going to reconnoitre a bit."

He crept gradually to the roof edge. Roger wished to follow him, but a wave of the hand decided him to remain still. The sign was one that all the world over means :

"Mind! there's danger."

XXIII.

THE night was clear and the frost extremely sharp. From where he remained, Saint-Senier could not see what there was at the base of the house, but he could very easily discern the row of trees on the right bank of the Seine. He also heard the peculiar grinding crash of blocks of ice driven

together one upon another by the current. As Bourdier had stated, the river flowed close to the mill. The wind blew from the north, but too faintly to drown the noises from land and water, which was unfortunate for any one attempting a passage in earshot of the foe. A tempest rattling the boughs and covering the starry sky with clouds would have been more favourable than this hard, dry weather. The bold messenger, no doubt, correctly estimated the whole difficulty of the undertaking since he had got out upon the roof, for, instead of hurrying on, he preserved complete immobility. Lying flat, his head alone beyond the eaves, he seemed to be heedfully studying the ground. Put on the alert by the signal addressed him, Roger did not dare stir, and he soon found the delay grow irksome. The temperature was freezing, and whatever habit the officer had acquired of camping out, he felt his limbs growing chill. He also feared that Régine was suffering more than he. Unflinchingly extended on the hard roofing, she paid no more heed to the rough contact to her delicate limbs than to the trying weather. But it became evident that the position would not long be tenable, and the officer worried about their guide's voluntary quiescence. To call him, even in a whisper, would perhaps be a grave imprudence, so he determined to go and join him. By crawling down with endless precautions, he managed to place himself side by side with the messenger, and when his head almost touched his, he heard these words breathed in his ear :

"Are your eyes good?"

"Yes," answered the lieutenant as low.

"Look on the bank, this side of the river, and tell me what you see."

As both sportsman and soldier, Saint-Senier had had plenty of opportunities to exercise his vision, and was able to tell at fifty paces the colour of a bird or the rank-marks of a soldier's coat. But the twilight and the intensity of the cold that pricked his eyelids much baffled him. In his new position, he could span in a glance the island, the flow of the Seine, and the opposite strand. The tongue of land on which rose the mill was bare and flat; hence there was no surprise to be feared here. At the very most, a cluster of bushes at the foot of the slope might serve to hide a spy. Fifteen paces farther the ground fell away abruptly, and on the ledge rose three or four thin, stunted willows. This was the spot which Pierre Bourdier had specially singled out for his imperilled companion's attention. Therefore Roger concentrated all his visual faculty on these few trees, yet saw nothing at first. A thin mist rose from the river like frozen spray, so that objects seemed floating in the transparent gauze. By fixing his eyes on the starting-point which one of the trees offered, the lieutenant believed he observed a something barely perceptible moving on the ground, a kind of black spot outlined against the lighter background of the grey vapour. By intent watching he made out that this patch momentarily vanished from sight. When it reappeared it certainly had changed its position. It seemed to Roger that he was again lying in wait in the Saint-Senier woods for a rabbit playing in front of its burrow. This remembrance gave him the idea that the suspicious object appertained to the animal kingdom.

"An otter," he said, so low, that Bourdier, to hear him, placed his cheek close to his.

"In winter, and in such a frost! that's not likely," returned the secret courier.

The lieutenant went on inspecting the shore. Fifty paces from the trees, on the left, rose a pointed black mass resembling a savage's hut. Atten-

tive examination was enough to ascertain it was one of those shelters made of cut boughs which the Algerian soldiers had imported into France, and which the eminently practical Germans did not disdain to use in their campaign, as Roger had more than once observed. He inferred from his personal experience that the Prussian sentinel, charged by the commissary to guard the river, was ensconced in this lodge. However, neither helmet-spike, nor bayonet-tip protruded, for the brass or steel would have glimmered in the twilight. But the ambush was unpleasantly near the spot which the observer supposed to be that for the crossing, and he shuddered at the idea of attempting it with Régine at so short a distance from the enemy. This observation led him to look for the rope along which the messenger expected to flee, and he perceived that it started from just under him. Only a few inches off, in fact, and quite within reach, the cable was fastened to an iron hook solidly screwed into a beam of the roof. Wishful to ascertain the strength of this line, to which they were to confide their lives, he found that it was about four fingers thick. This offered ample guarantee of stoutness, but not a safe passage. The mere action of starting appeared most risky, as they would have to slide down off the roof, under the rope, by means of hands and feet encircling the frail support.

"Did you see?" whispered Pierre.

"What?"

"The black speck moving beside the shelter-hut."

The object had moved so swiftly that it had eluded Roger whilst feeling the cable.

"Well?" he inquired, full of confidence in his comrade's sagacity.

"I am on solid ground now," returned the envoy.

"What?"

"That's the beggar boy who has smelt the game, and is hovering round the ferry place. He has seen nothing on the move, and he has gone into the hut to warm himself beside his friend the Prussian."

"Well?" interrogated the anxious lieutenant.

"It proves that the little tramp is not aware we are in the mill. If he knew that, he would already have drummed up the Germans to have the house rummaged from top to bottom. He is spying about at haphazard, and to keep his hand in, but he is not on our trail."

"I believe you are right, but what are we to do?"

"Start," said Pierre plainly.

"Start!" exclaimed Roger, forgetting to moderate the pitch of his voice, "when that scoundrel boy may catch us halfway?"

"The victims of beggars cannot be choosers. Mark me well. The night is long, but our road to Paris is not like a stroll in the Bois. Hence we must not lose time."

"That's true, but—"

"Now," interrupted Bourdier, "it's two chances to three that the scamp will not come out for an hour or so. Vipers like warmth, and that wretch will bask in the cover. If he does have the whim to make a new round, he will wait till about midnight. So, this is the fit moment to slope, and we must profit by it."

The lieutenant offered no objection to the argument; but the nearer the time of supreme peril came, the more he trembled for Régine. Perchance the messenger divined what troubled him, for he hastened to give his last instructions.

"The order of march is this," he quickly said. "I am going first, you can then start the girl, and you will form the rear-guard yourself."

"Agreed," muttered the officer, feeling the impossibility of further debate.

"I will explain why I regulate our progress so," went on Bourdier. "You understand that if the other bank is guarded, the first over will be caught. Better be it me. If misfortune does befall me, you can return into the hiding-place and wait for Sarrazin to deliver you. He's a fine fellow, as you see, and he will help you to get away."

"Thanks," said Roger, affected to tears by this devotion so simply offered.

"You will thank me in Paris. Now, let's get all clear. I shall want about ten minutes to reach the right bank. So, start the girl a quarter of an hour after me. If, unfortunately, I am seized on landing, I shall call out three times to let you know."

Without awaiting an answer, the fearless Bourdier dived head first on the rope and swung himself round into the proper position.

XXIII.

It was not without a pang at the heart that Saint-Senier saw the brave messenger venture on the rope. He had omitted to ask advice as to the best manner of effecting the passage, and, whatever his desire promptly to rejoin Régine, he believed it his duty to remain on observation at the edge of the roof to see how Pierre managed. The latter seemed gifted with peculiar aptness for the feat, since he moved along with astounding rapidity. With extended body, hands clutching the cord, and legs bent around it, he proceeded like a snake, and so dexterously that it hardly swayed. At first the iron hook had creaked a little under the unusual pull, but once the tension was equalised the hold did not give. Proportionately to the bold traveller's progress, the lieutenant felt an anxiety gradually master him, and it paralysed all his movements. He felt that odd physical sensation always known when one witnesses a man walking on the brink of a precipice, a nervous contraction allied to vertigo which may rise into acute pain. To this involuntary giddiness was joined a more reasonable disquiet. The critical time of the passage was when the row of willows had to be passed, and Bourdier was nearing that dangerous point. Naturally, the cable, fastened at one end at an elevation, curved down from the roof-edge to the bank; where the removed ferry-boat had been moored, it came down to a man's height from the ground. It was here that the great *crux* arose. To begin with, the movement was no longer favoured by the incline which had facilitated sliding along without much effort. Over the river where the line was almost horizontally stretched, the aerial traveller's work became much more painful. Furthermore, this was on the level of the rough sentry-box, fifty paces below stream, so that one entered within the field of sight of the watchers.

Pale with anguish, Roger saw the messenger disappear behind the willow at the foot of which the little spy's head had shown a few minutes previously. He held his breath. Happily this terrible suspense was brief. Nothing stirred about the Prussian's watchbox, and after a score of seconds' indescribable anxiety, he saw his intrepid comrade emerge beyond the screen of trees. The fog had thickened, and he was only distinguishable

as a black blur on the opaque atmosphere. But his form progressively diminished and became less and less apparent, making it clear that the crossing went on without impediment, and that Pierre Bourdier would be only a few seconds before touching land. At this decisive moment, Roger lifted up his soul to heaven and prayed with fervour for the courageous man not to be forgotten who sacrificed himself to his fatherland. The prayer was heard, for the adventurer's form soon blended with the sombre right bank and entirely disappeared in its protecting shadow. Joy flooded the heart of the sole witness of the touching act. The uninterrupted silence reigning over the stream was a certain indication of success.

"Had mishap befallen him," reasoned Saint-Senier, "I should have had an inkling. If he had met the foe on the other bank, he would have shouted. If his strength had given way and he had fallen, I should have heard the splash."

Still he waited, but nothing troubled the nightly calm, and he uttered a sigh of relief. The ten minutes had passed. The time to venture in his turn on the frightful passage was come, or rather for Régine, following the order prescribed by Bourdier. Even as he turned to crawl up to the girl, he felt his cheek brushed. As usual, she had anticipated his intention. Ere long she was taking the place lately occupied by the messenger on the roof edge. Her face almost touched the officer's, and their eyes could speak in that language which the poor dumb girl employed with such eloquence. In her sparkling glance, the soldier could read that she was ready, nay, eager, to brave danger and toil once more. But though the mountebank's pupil hesitated not, he trembled for her. The idea of letting her go out alone on the slender line was as repugnant to him as a crime, and second thoughts only favoured a project he had previously formed. The courier's directions had been given too hastily for objections to be made, but they might be modified.

"The rope is undoubtedly fit to bear two persons' weight," thought the lieutenant.

Besides, nothing retained him on the roof after the girl quitted it. There was even more the advantage of the double transit abridging the affair, since the right bank was free, and the watchbox silent. But above all, Roger foresaw that if Régine flagged on the way, she might need a vigorous helping hand. What finally decided him was his not feeling the nerve to go through the same tribulation again of watching the journey across.

"I'd rather perish with her," he muttered, "than stay here doing no good, and worried by uneasiness, whilst she dangled 'twixt life and death."

His mind made up, there only remained to proceed as quickly as possible, for every minute's delay might ruin all. Ought he to pass the first, or follow the girl? She cut the knot herself. She rose up on her hands and offered him her forehead to kiss. He understood, and gave her a chaste kiss, their first, perchance their last! which she received with downcast eyes. But when she lifted up her head, a strange fire blazed in them. That kiss which might be a farewell one, seemed to have exalted her courage. With incredible skill and celerity, she turned round without rising, so that she was in the reverse position to the rope that Bourdier had chosen, that is to say, her face was to the roof, and her feet were outward, in stockings only, for she had hung her shoes by a tape around her neck as childrens' mittens are suspended. The officer had neither time nor knowledge to indicate a better course for her to pursue as now her clothes

would not embarrass her. And, besides, he fancied that she desired to die, if die she must, with her face towards her friend.

"At least I shall have her last look if we go under," he mused.

But he had not drained the lees of the cup that surprise held out to him. Instead of sliding down the rope as if it were a plank, the mountebank's pupil suddenly caught hold of it with her feet as if they were an ape's, and rose as if by some magical impulse so as to be upright with a slight inclination to counteract the slope. Her arms opened out a little, straight, at an acute angle, like the arms of the governor of an engine. Roger was almost unable to contain a burst of gladness; he understood, the showman had taught her rope dancing. Cheerily he embarked on the line, but adopting Bourdier's method. Régine had already gone far enough to be quite clear of him, and the double voyage commenced rather favourably. As for the courageous girl, she went along the slack rope with indescribable coolness, suppleness and endurance. Roger followed her so closely that their heads almost met at times in the inevitable checks and resumptions of the descent. Thus the row of willows was reached without accident. On attaining this limit, where the advance entered upon so many perils and difficulties, the lieutenant found out that the arm of the river to be crossed was broad enough to alarm the most intrepid. He did not yet feel fatigued but it seemed to him that his leader went on less quickly. However, she gained the water's edge without the least symptom of hesitation or weakness, and Roger plucked up courage again. Whilst slowly crawling after her, he looked about, and had the inexpressible delight of seeing nobody upon the strand. The Seine thundered on and the blocks of ice almost entirely mantling its bosom, rushed rapidly by in the violent current. It was like an incessant torrent, accompanied by sinister crashes and crumblings, so that Roger turned his eyes from a sight that might give him the vertigo. Sometimes, though, the whole mass would stop, a jam having blocked the floating pieces, which pile up on one another into heaps of snowy hue. Then the dam would burst and the flow would resume its rush.

It was clear enough that the river would soon be frozen over and that it could be crossed on foot after some hours. But it was a badly chosen moment to regret the decision taken by Bourdier, and Saint-Senier struggled on with quite other thoughts. Every passing minute brought the fugitives' goal the nearer, though each effort added to their fatigue. The frost was biting and the nipping wind came from the due north. Roger felt his blood chilling and his limbs getting numb. He feared that Régine's frail body could not long resist such sufferings. They had reached the middle of the channel, but what was left to do was the most painful part of all. At this juncture Roger glanced back to reckon how far they had gone, and in doing so he fancied he saw a human shape moving on the islet shore.

XXIV.

SAINT-SENIER had not the time to prolong an examination for which his position on the rope did not suit. He averted his eyes from the bank left behind and went on again with wrist and knee in play. But whether the cold had seized him wholly, this fresh movement overtaxed his muscles, and he felt he was less supple and strong. Nervous spasms ran through his stiff limbs and he felt millions of pins and needles all over him. With affright he recognised the ordinary forerunners of cramp. If the

involuntary constriction increased sufficiently to completely paralyse him, of course he would be lost. Being a practised swimmer, the lieutenant knew by experience that complete immobility was the sole means of preventing a crisis of this sort. So he paused to wait for the pain to pass, his body stiffened out horizontally and his head thrown back.

Sight must have marvellously well replaced absent hearing in the show-girl, and she must have preserved prodigious coolness, for as soon as her companion decided not to stir, she imitated his example. She seemed in nowise weary from the long and painful work, and her eyes did not quit Roger's contracted lineaments, as though she watched for the critical moment so as to help him. Notwithstanding all his energy the officer was near wanting it now. The cramp had not set in entirely, but its equally dreaded ally, cold, was to be struggled with. So long as he had been in motion along the rope, that had kept up the circulation of his blood and regularised his respiration. But in ceasing to move, he had given a hold to the bitter temperature and he was defenceless against the polar wind.

This was the well-known effect which killed so many French soldiers in the Russian campaign. During the dreadful retreat from Moscow in 1812, every laggard who stopped went to sleep, and whoever slept, died. Roger experienced all the symptoms, many times described, of the torpor which stupefies and is followed by eternal repose. His eyes closed, his chest shrank, and his arms became heavy. Like the old grenadiers on the fatal plains of Smolensko, he was going to fall to rise no more.

Instead of the snow which served as a shroud to the Grande Armée, the stream ran beneath to receive the unfortunate officer, under its icy tombstones. A strange humming filled his ears, and his numbed brain only experienced a mixture of vague ideas and physical pangs. At times he fancied that his body was compressed in a cold vice and that his soul was taking wing towards the pavilion where Renée was praying. To these abnormal sensations succeeded a moment's comfort. He was in the intermediate state between wakefulness and the annihilation of mental life which is so delicious in a good bed after excessive fatigue. But the bed awaiting him was the muddy one of the river. A few seconds more and the frozen officer would drop into it. Still his hands and legs clung mechanically to the cable, but the wind would shortly shake them loose and toss him into the abyss. This anguish had lasted less time than it has taken to depict it, and had one witness. Régine had watched the progress of the suffering which distorted her companion's features, and she drew nigh. At the moment when Roger drooped in an extreme convulsion, he felt her fingers stroke his and a hard object rap at his clenched teeth. By a double impulse of instinct, he clenched his hands and he opened his mouth. Instantly a sharp liquid scorched his palate and darted down into his breast to fire up his heart which sprang into violent throbbing. The dying man opened his eyes and gasped in relief. He was saved. The young girl had poured him out a mouthful of the brandy left in Bourdier's flask. Her devotion and adroitness had enabled her to balance herself seated, holding on with one hand alone, whilst with the other she carried the reviving cordial to his lips.

If Roger could have reflected on what was happening, he would have believed this a fantastic intervention without the recollection of Régine's former profession, for only the most fearless acrobat would have attempted such a feat. But the officer was barely reviving to bodily life and was in no condition to collect his thoughts. Nevertheless, as the glow of

the brandy warmed his blood and relieved his sinews, he regained intelligence, and his eyes wandered from his deliverer to the farther bank and back again. A sudden and violent sound finished restoring him fully to himself. A report came from the left bank, and it was the more impossible for a soldier to mistake as it was followed by a prolonged shrill whiz. A gun had been fired at the fugitives, and the bullet had passed near them. It sounded the signal for Roger to wake up completely. Spurred on by peril, he found strength and a clear mind. He had even derived from the unexpected shock a convulsive energy and incredible rapidity of conception. He resumed the creeping along, one glance at the island enabling him to guess what had happened. Through the still thickening fog, he confusedly perceived two shadows moving about near the watch-hut, one more distinct than the other. Beyond doubt, the latter was the Prussian sentry who had fired, and the other the horrible beggar boy who had run down the bank in advance of him, to point out the runaways.

"I was not mistaken a little while ago," thought the officer, "I did indeed see the little monster gliding among the willows."

Danger had grown so great as to exclude almost all chances of safety. Such as they were, Roger reckoned them up calmly. The cramp had seized him at a little more than half way across the river, about fifty yards remained to be covered ere reaching the right bank, but it was the hardest part as the cord ran upwards on nearing the shore, the end being attached to some large tree. The strand remained silent, and the shot had only awokened one long echo. Quite recovered from his weakness, the lieutenant felt capable of gaining the promised land. Though Régine had not heard the detonation, she had seen the flash, and set at ease as regards her friend, now revived by the brandy, she had risen and with redoubled ardour, resumed the painful aerial locomotion. But the fugitives were not able to hope that the Prussian would not fire again on them, or that he would miss them as before. Besides, his comrades could not be far off, and if they ran up at the report, the two friends would be exposed to a volley. It is true the sky was clouding over, and the cold night's murkiness by dimming the air, would somewhat protect them. A second shot came from the willows. The marksman had drawn nearer, but still he missed. The bullet must have struck something on the right bank, for the lieutenant believed he heard a dull sound after the whizz of the shot.

"The third bullet will hit me," he muttered, and, thinking of Régine, he said: "I hope it will only hit me."

At this same moment the shrill voice of the mendicant reached him. The words could not be distinguished, but by the high pitch and broken tone, it could be inferred that the little demon was splitting his lungs to urge on the Germans. During the interval between the two shots, the fugitives had gained a few yards. Only their parts seemed reversed. It was the girl now who gave unequivocal tokens of fatigue, as though she had exhausted all her remaining strength in saving her companion. On the contrary, the soldier watched over her and displayed extraordinary vigour. All at once, he turned his head. A rough blow shook the rope, and but little more they would have been flung into the Seine.

"We are lost this time," said Roger seeing what had occurred on shore.

XXV.

THERE were good grounds for alarm. The sentinel and the beggar had no doubt united at the foot of the willow-tree over which the ferry-rope passed, and perhaps their uproar had attracted the other soldiers, for a rather compact group now moved about on the bank. They were too far off and the night was not clear enough for Roger, badly placed too for taking observations, to make out what they were doing. But the shock suddenly given to the cable forced him to think they contemplated another kind of attack. The shooting had ceased, either because all his cartridges had been expended by the sentinel or he wished to try something else in discouragement at his faulty aim. The officer thought at first that the Germans were cutting the cable, and shivered at thought of the death that would ensue in that event. The right bank was too distant for the fugitives to have the least chance of attaining it.

The best swimmer, indeed, would not be able to contend against the swift current and, even were he robust enough to cross the cold waters, he would be ground to meal between the blocks of ice. His fall would be mortal. However after a short swinging, the rope resumed its immobility. What infernal project, then, were the Prussians meditating? Saint-Senier found an answer on beholding a black body stand out from the row of trees. This mass appeared to be suspended in the air and was moving slowly. All was accounted for : the discontinuance of the firing and the shake imparted to the rope. One of the enemy had determined to pursue the French by the same perilous way. By jumping, he had been able to catch hold of the rope and now, imitating the fugitives, he was working his way along with hands and legs, pretty skilfully, too, for his progress was visible.

After seeing at a glance this new danger which so gallingly enhanced the dangers of his position, the lieutenant augmented his efforts to advance. It became a question of speed. If they could reach land before this inveterate pursuer, there was a ray of hope. The ground on the right bank appeared woody enough for possible concealment and they might reach Vesinet wood, but to carry out this plan hypothetical any way, they must keep up the start to baffle the foe. On that point depended safety. Saint-Senier therefore gathered all the powers left him to cover the space separating them from the shore and quickly proceeded several yards. But then he found that Régine, who had let him pass her, as if to guard him from the shots, no longer followed. Since a little while she had revealed unmistakeable tokens of fatigue and, on approaching her, he saw that her features had drawn down and that her eyes were closed ; she had sunk into that sitting position peculiar to rope walkers which is a miracle of equilibrium, but can be long maintained. This change greatly frightened the officer who hastened to hoist himself up with one arm upon the rope, and sustain her head on his shoulder while he grasped the flask hanging round her neck. It was his turn to help her as she had but lately saved him. He did it less neatly than the heroic girl, for he had all the trouble in the world to force a few drops between her teeth. Yet he did manage, and when once the cordial was absorbed, it did its work. Régine revived and rose again into movement, but it was easily seen that her forces were more and more exhausted and that she would not long resist this fearful strain. Hence they must hasten on to abridge the rest of the ordeal and also to recover lost time.

The unknown enemy drew on apace. Roger perceived that by the vibrations of the rope, becoming more and more evident as the weight approached. Once he turned his head to see if the distance between them had lessened and mainly to see with whom he would have to cope. The mad fellow who pursued them had gained at least a score of yards during the girl's swoon. He was even close enough for his shape to be defined sharply against the grey vapour rising from the river. He was too little to be a Prussian. Besides it was barely probable that a burly trooper would have risked himself on this spider's thread. The impish beggar boy could alone be capable of such a feat. Still the lieutenant was startled that a child, of however evil a disposition, should carry the love for his vile trade so far as to expose his life thus. He was soon to be able to judge the full extent of the youngster's powers. A shrill, uneven laugh burst out behind him and a piercing voice screamed :

"Ha, ha ! You French fellows, ahoy ! Just wait a bit till I come up with you."

Though the elf had completely discarded the weeping tone with which he asked alms, there was no mistaking him. It was really he who crawled along the cable. He had the suppleness as well as the guile of a serpent and rapidly advanced.

"The scoundrel is overtaking us," muttered Roger, perceiving that the rope-dancer lagged more and more painfully behind.

Whilst continuing his own efforts to gain the shore, and often upholding his companion when he saw her totter, he thought that Pierre Bourdier was yonder, hiding only a few paces away, invisibly watching this mighty struggle. He had the idea of calling him, but restrained himself for fear of revealing his friend's whereabouts to the Prussians on the island.

"If we can only arrive soon enough to outstrip this little goblin," he considered, "the enemy had better believe there were only two of us."

But the distance between them and the pursuer visibly diminished as well as Régine's powers. Roger was puzzled whether he had not better await the rascal.

"I am strong enough yet to wring his neck and fling him into the water," he growled. "The Prussians will not fire whilst we are wrestling lest they kill their envoy."

As he came to this extreme resolution, the vagabond's squeaky voice broke upon the silence.

"You won't wait for me, eh ? but I shall catch you all the same and kill you."

This threat of death to the accompaniment of the roaring waters gave Roger a chill.

"I shall kill you, for I have a pistol, ha, ha !" yelped the horrible brat, "a pistol my chum the Prussian lent me, and it's loaded all right."

Now the lieutenant understood why the enemy forebore to fire. They wanted to give themselves the ferocious "treat" of seeing the boy whose treachery they had purchased, assassinate his fellow countrymen. This refinement of barbarity pleased them as much as the spectacle of the strange acrobatic performance over the watery abyss. The youngster's voice became sharper and nearer.

"I could pop you off now if I liked," said the lad ; "but I am afraid I might miss you."

"You hell-bound imp !" muttered the officer.

"I prefer to blow your brains out at close quarters," continued the

beggar ; "then I shall see all the fun—the last ngly face you pull and the somersault you will turn into the river, ha, ha !"

Roger ground his teeth with rage. There was no use in attempting an impossible struggle—the whole thing was to reach land and do so quickly, for the infernal yonth was racing on. Régine hardly kept her feet, and at each step her face twitched and her month opened convulsively. To keep upon the rope cost her the last shreds of her energy at length vanquished by exhaustion. Yet she did hold out, and the land was bnt twenty yards away. Only a few strides more and they would be npon it.

"I have six chambers in my revolver," howled the boy, never pausing.

"What a blessing she cannot hear him," thought our lieutenant.

"No. One for you, my cock," continued the hateful voice, "and one, two, for your girl."

"Yon infamous villain ! " cried the infuriated officer.

"I see yon now—I see yon clear and I know you. Yon may howl as yon like—you both shall get a bullet."

Régine wrestled with the last attacks of a nervous pain which thrilled her broken body. She moved by fits and starts, and Roger trembled lest she should make a misstep. In one of these convulsive moments their heads knocked together, and he pressed his lips to her forehead. She shuddered under the embrace and seemed galvanised into a little force. Somehow they gained ten or a dozen steps, and the bank loomed up before them dark and noiseless.

"Bourdier !" called ont the lieutenant in a suppressed voice.

He felt that the show-girl's life was trembling in the balance, and that the messenger alone might perhaps aid him to save her.

"Yes, sing away, old fellow," yelped the voice, "my shots will bear accompaniment."

Roger turned and distinctly saw the beggar extend his arm, and at the same time, he hear the click, click of the hammer he was cocking.

XXVI.

THIS time Lieutenant de Saint-Senier believed that the end had come. He prayed God that indeed the first bullet might strike him.

"At least, I shall not behold her die," he thought.

The beggar had announced as mnch and he kept his word, for the lead whistled by within two inches of the young soldier's head.

"It looks as if I were still too far off," snarled the boy, "bnt, never mind, yon'll lose nothing by waiting."

Roger felt by the vibration of the rope, that the murderer drew nearer. He had the fortitude to look round and see that whilst the space between him and the lad had lessened, the revived Régine had also got rather nearer to land ; it was only half a dozen yards hence. One more effort and they might reach it. Bnt the insatiable tiger-cub still advanced. The soldier heard him hissing a tune between his teeth and snapping the revolver hammer from half-cock to full. He had the thought of letting go of the rope. The bank was so nigh that there was some chance of hanging on to it or being swept in by the current. Whatever was the danger of a fall into the swift and glacial river, it was better than to wait till a bullet came at point-blank. But to risk so desperate a leap, he would have to forewarn the rope-dancer so that she might spring off the cord. Then would

the relieved line tighten out and send the boy flying. But the girl was too far to be touched and made to understand by gestures. And she could not hear his voice. To drop into the water was to throw her off the rope, as well.

"Best to stay," reasoned Roger, "he may not kill me off hand, and whilst he tries again, I may grasp him, and she will perhaps have time to escape."

"Ha!" ejaculated the little monster, only three paces off. "I have you at last, and no miss this time."

The officer looked back and saw the speaker stretch himself cautiously along the cable holding on by one hand, whilst with the other he levelled the revolver, resting on the line, to make his aim the surer. Despair inspired Roger to shake the rope to divert the aim, and he did swing it violently. This at first disconcerted the abominable youth, who lowered the pistol for a moment in order to hold on with both hands and preserve his balance, but he soon clung on firmly, recovered coolness and resumed taking aim.

"Wriggling and twisting won't do, old fellow; you will have to take your blue pill," he said with a frightful chuckle.

"Help, Bourdier, help!" shouted the officer, as if the army courier were in hearing.

He had not finished this ultimate appeal, before he felt the cable give way entirely under him. Before he had time to understand what happened, he was dashed down into the water in which he disappeared. He felt dead, and during the few seconds that lasted until he came up to the surface, he thought that the bullet had hit him. It was a brief sensation but atrocious, and none of the impressions which torture the drowning were spared him. When his head emerged and he caught breath, he heard a horrid howl, and a voice calling him by name. The howl was the beggar's, who was hurled along by the current after him, and the voice was Bourdier's.

"Stick to the rope, and drag yourself up it, in here," it said.

He then perceived that he had mechanically kept his grip on the cable during his fall, and the brave messenger held the end. On his knees on the banks Bourdier held out his arms to Régine who, nearer the bank, was of course within reach. The lieutenant understood. Pierre, watching them from the shelter he had picked out in the riverside bushes, had decided to sever the rope when he saw the murder about to take place, but he had taken the precaution to keep hold of it at the end. Between his sturdy hands it became a life-line. The next thing was to profit by it. Régine had already done so, and was now lying on dry land. Roger had more to do, for he had fallen farther out. The chill of the water overcame him and he had been out of breath during his submersion. Still, on seeing the girl out of danger and their friend ready to help him in turn, he recovered his powers. He drew himself as best he could towards shore, both hands on the cable, and his feet trying to tread the water. After rescuing Régine, Bourdier hastened to wind the rope securely round a tree stump hard by, so that there would be a firm hold-fast for the wader. The passing blocks of ice in the furious current greatly tormented the latter, more than once cutting his knuckles and wounding his face. But he pressed onward, and, after a minute's painful effort, and many cruel pangs, had the unspeakable gratification of touching land.

"God bless you, Pierre!" he gasped, as he climbed the bank and dropped exhausted beside the girl.

"Don't mention it," said the messenger simply, "and let's be off. This is no place for a quiet chat."

A frightful shriek rang in Roger's ears.

"Help me! I'm dying!" cried a heart-rending voice.

"The boy!" ejaculated the officer rising.

It was he indeed. He had not let go of the rope and the current had dragged him down at the same time as those he had tried to slay. Now that the rope was fixed again, he clung to it and tried despairingly to work along it to shore.

"Just wait," muttered Pierre, "just wait, you scoundrel; I'll help you."

He stooped to unfasten the knot he had made round the tree. Roger checked him.

"Mercy for that hapless lad," he said in a moved voice.

"For that monster!" cried Bourdier, "never! it was too much to spare him in the forest."

"Have pity on me, my kind gentlemen," yelled the boy, "don't let a little fellow die!"

"I'll do it if only to prevent him telling the Prussians to fire again on us," retorted the secret messenger, laying his hand on the rope.

"You see they are not firing," remonstrated Roger, "they believe we are all drowned and we can easily save this little wretch."

"Why, you are mad, man!" cried Bourdier.

"Forgive me, my kind, charitable gentlemen, forgive me," said the voice, "I'll never be naughty again. I was so poor and they promised me money."

He had kept creeping in and was only a short way from the bank.

"I beg his life of you," said Roger. "Heaven has saved us, so I would gladly save somebody's life."

"But don't you see that, if we fished him out, he would dog us to denounce us again?"

"We might tie him up—"

"Yes, as I did in the wood, so he could gnaw himself free and be on our track in an hour. Anybody'd think, captain, that we had nothing more to do. Don't you know that what we've done is a fleabite to the rest. Two hours among the Prussian outposts and the Seine to cross again."

"Mercy!" gurgled the beggar.

"No! his appeals rend my heart," said Roger; "if we let him die, it seems to me that we shall have bad luck."

"I will serve you," continued the mendicant, "I will, as I did the Prussians—I know all the roads and where the posts are—you will see—I can take you anywhere—into Paris if you like."

"Do you hear that?" asked Roger.

"Yes, I hear that the scamp is plotting a new dodge," grumbled Bourdier.

"Dying men don't tell lies, and I—"

"What?" abruptly challenged the courier, stopping the speaker by the arm.

"I am going to lend him a hand," cried the lieutenant, rushing to the bank, before the other could stay him.

He bent over to help the boy who was battling with the blocks of ice.

"Help, my kind master! help! I can't hold up any longer! my strength is gone!"

"Give me your hand!" said Roger, going down upon his knees.

"I cannot—I'm too far out," replied the boy.

The officer bent over the water edge and extended his arm. On the instant the beggar's clawlike fingers hooked on the sleeve of his blouse.

"Ha, ha ! got one of 'em " chuckled the inhuman creature. "I am not going under all alone !"

And out rang his hellish laughter.

XVII.

ROGER would have had no difficulty in shaking off the boy's clutch if he had been in a better position. But when the compassionate officer was thus treacherously seized, he was kneeling on the edge, bending his body forward and holding out one arm, the other just resting on the verge. The pull made him lose his balance and pitch head first into the water. The horrible urchin changed his grip to the throat with the right hand, but without letting go of the rope with the left. No doubt he had calculated on toppling his prey over at the first tug, and he may even have hoped to save himself by the rope after drowning his enemy. But he had only partly succeeded as the lieutenant had even been served by his fall, since, being flat on the land and water, he offered more resistance to the murderer's desperate pulls.

"You devil's own !" roared Bourdier, seeing the very trap succeed that he had suspected.

He sprang, at the same time, to his imprudent companion's succour, but he was not the first to arrive. Régine, whom fatigue had stretched on the ground, and who had appeared insensible to what passed around her—she rose suddenly as Roger fell, she ran to him and held him by his blouse before the messenger brought him aid as well. The beggar was a dreadful sight ; his hair glued against his livid cheeks, his mouth open to utter hoarse barks and frightful chuckles—all gave him the semblance of a demon at the bank of an infernal flood.

"The girl, too ! " yelled the brat ; "she shall come along with you !"

In spite of his skill and strength, Bourdier found himself puzzled how to enter into the fight. Roger's head was half in the water, and it was not merely a question of preventing him being drawn in. If the struggle was prolonged, he might be smothered before the vagabond's strength was spent. The messenger understood this so clearly that he picked up a stick and held it out to the boy.

"There you are, scoundrel," he said, "let go the rope, and I'll pull you out. You sha'n't be hurt, either."

"No, no," vociferated the little demon, "I don't believe you—you would kill me—and I don't mean to die alone."

"Die, then, you viper !" said Bourdier, flinging aside the stick, and bounding back, with a fresh idea.

"Ha, ha !" yelled the beggar, "I have 'em ! they must come and be drowned—the pair of them—d'y'e hear that—both he and—"

He was given no time to finish the speech. The cable, grasped in his left hand, gave way to the current, which whipped him away with the more speed as the tension had been powerful. Surprised by this unexpected yielding, he tried, vainly, to cling to the lieutenant's collar ; his clenched fingers opened ; his body, rolling in the froth, flew away like an arrow, and vanished in the night. His final yell of rage was cut short by

a vengeful sheet of ice which smashed in his skull. And, being joined by other pieces, they were all cemented into one slab which closed over him like the flag of a vault. Delivered of the grasp, the officer was able to rise just as his breath was failing him. Once again he owed his life to the presence of mind of the brave messenger, who had so timely detached the rope's end. He had swiftly calculated that all the beggar's force depended on his fulcrum, and that instead of prolonging the dangerous struggle, it was better to cut it short by risking all for all. Régine, on whom he had relied to resist the shock, did not deceive his expectation. She had held the half-choked lieutenant with incredible tenacity at the moment when the beggar tightened his grip in his last convulsion. She was ever the same valiant girl who, for twenty hours, fearlessly passed through every peril, and surmounted them all. Roger sat up and gasped for breath.

"Well, comrade," said Bourdier, who ran back to him after his happy stroke, "I hope to heaven you are cured of generosity."

"Oh, that death-cry! I can hear it still," murmured the officer.

"Twas the howl of a wild beast," sharply answered the messenger from the Army of the Loire, "and you'll not catch me repenting I rid the country of it."

"A mere child! who would have thought—"

"You do not know what such vermin are. The invader corrupts them everywhere he goes, and there's plenty of them left—"

"Yet he was French—"

"Yes, such French as we have seen a few of since our disasters commenced," said Bourdier between his teeth; "but this is no time for that, and we have none to waste. Look here, comrade, are you able to push on a bit? I do not too clearly know whither it will lead us, but it will be our last tramp, I warrant you."

"I am worn out," said Roger in a low tone, ashamed of his weakness.

"Just you gulp down some more of this brandy," said the courier, taking the flask which had hung round Régine's neck beside the shoes which she was patiently putting on. "You must admit that it was a first-rate idea of mine to make you a present of it before starting."

"Thank you, comrade, I feel better."

"Ay, ay, as you did a while ago when dancing on the rope. I saw you from here, and I thought for the nonce that you were going to stop on the way."

"Twas she who saved me," said Roger, looking at the show girl.

"I know that, and you can boast of having a brave little lady there. I should very much like to see her again, after we get into Paris, if ever we do."

"What more is there for us to do? I am ready to march," cried the officer, rising.

"Many things that I am going to explain to you. First, we must be off from here, for this place is no good for a discussion."

"You are right; and I am amazed that they do not fire on us; the Prussians are on the islet—"

"Pooh! the hardest drinkers in the whole Pomeranian army corps, luckily for us. I knew how to manage as regards them, for old Sarrazin was directed to keep them muddled with his Argenteuil wine. It was that little scoundrel that egged them on to send a couple of bullets; at present, the sentry is curled up in his hole, and his comrades believe like him that we are all at the bottom of the Seine."

Whilst speaking, Bourdier clambered up the steep slope of the bank, followed by his two friends.

"There is only one thing I fear," he resumed when they arrived at the top, "and that is that the gunshots put on the alert all the posts and patrols swarming on this side of the river."

"Whereabouts are we?" inquired Saint-Senier, looking around him.

"On the plain of Argenteuil, a league and a half at most from any French outpost."

The fugitives had stopped on the edge of a road running along the Seine, and the ground before them was flat and uncovered. A few lonely houses stood out as white spots on the dark plain. On the left a line of rather high hills closed in the horizon.

"Mark me," said the messenger in the curt tones of a leader giving his instructions in a dangerous expedition, "that's Sartrouville where you see light on our right, and a little farther the black mass next the fire—which must be that of a Prussian camp—is the village of Houilles. All these places are begirt with Germans, and we must not rub up against them. To the left on the highlands, going Cormeil, Franconville or Sannois way, it is even worse, and, besides, that would lead us away. Therefore we must go straight before us."

"What! over fields where we shall not find a bush to hide us!"

"The very reason for it to be our luck not to find a Prussian; they carefully guard villages and woods, but they do not so much dread the plains. They will be on the Pontoise road, which we shall be obliged to cross, but it is not written that we must run on their videttes."

"But where shall we find ourselves?" inquired Roger, rather uneasy at hearing this thorny itinerary laid down.

"At Bezons bridge," Bourdier answered placidly.

"Why, that's madness! the Prussians occupy it in force. I have been with the main guard in my battalion on the plain of Gennevilliers, and I know that that point is the best guarded on all their lines."

"Quite so, but, since you know that corner, you must have seen that our riflemen guard all the right bank. Colombes, Bois-Colombes and Nanterre are full of troops, and in a hamlet at the end of the bridge, by name Petit-Nanterre, I know of a detachment of sharpshooters who will receive us with open arms."

"But to the point, do you expect the enemy will let us cross the bridge?"

"Not the bridge, but the Seine, perhaps."

"How? there are no boats, and we shall not find any ferry ropes there as here."

"True enough, and besides, a man does not do two performances a-day on the high rope, barring he is Blondin the hero of Niagara," said Bourdier, merrily. "But, you see, comrade, I have lived out of doors long enough to tell the weather. To travel from here to Bezons will take three hours, and I am pretty sure that in three hours the Seine will be frozen over. We shall cross without wetting our feet."

Saint-Senier held his peace, confounded by so much audacity and trustfulness.

"But if the river is not frozen?" he protested, after a pause.

"It will be," said the messenger, unaware that he repeated the heroic response of Marshal Ney, on the bank of the Dnieper during the retreat from Russia.

XXVIII.

AFTER so precise an assertion and before a will so categorically expressed, Roger de Saint-Senier would have been ashamed to raise an objection. There was nothing to do but step out and he did it without a word. Not that he augured well of the issue of this hazardous journey, but the die was cast and the danger of retreating or remaining surpassed that of advancing. As for Régine, pursuant to her invariable habit, she had impassibly looked on at the dialogue which she could follow only with her eyes. But, despite cold, wet and weariness, her pale face breathed the same undaunted spirit. Upon the gloomy plain to be crossed amid hostile posts, she was the same calm, grave, and resolute being they had known in wood and on water.

"We must start," briefly said Pierre Bourdier, "and as we shall not be able to chat on the road, we must settle on our plan of action once for all."

"I listen and am ready," said Saint-Senier.

"To begin with," went on the courier, "it is understood that I take the lead, for several reasons, principally that I alone know the road."

"Yes, my dear fellow, but you wish also to be the most exposed to danger, and I can tell you by that."

"Tush ! where's the harm if I save you from receiving a bullet ? My life is certainly not worth that of an officer ; and I would rather die three times over than see a hair fall from the head of this brick of a girl who has saved us."

"I thank you for her," said the lieutenant, giving his hand for a hearty shake, "but do you not think of your despatches ?"

"I was thinking so much of them that I am going to give you the duplicate, replied Bourdier, producing the valuable cigarette paper from his pocket. "Roll up this leaf," he added, as he offered him his tobacco pouch, "you know the way to make use of it in case of a Prussian search."

"I have certainly not forgotten it, but—"

"But me no buts, comrade, I am asking you a service and you cannot refuse me it. Moreover, you must give me your word of honour to do what I am going to tell you."

"I do, and I shall keep it, come what may !"

"Good ! swear to me, then, that if I am killed or taken, you will not worry about me, but try to get through with the paper and the girl."

Saint-Senier would have liked to revoke his pledge, but he was aware that the heroic envoy would not allow that and he drooped his head without remark.

"Even though you see me fall wounded a few yards off, even though I prove weak enough to call you, you must flee and not even look behind you to see what the enemy do with me."

There ensued a rather long silence.

"The interest of France claims it," said Bourdier, "for if mishap befalls me, this will be the only chance of saving the message."

"Have it your own way," muttered the officer.

"I depend on it, then ; and now I have only one piece of advice for you. Follow me with the lady at eight or ten steps, more or less as it is light or dark, but always so as to keep sight of me. Whatever you see me do, do it too ; whether I stop, run, stoop, lie down, repeat at once and exactly my every move."

"That's it."

"As for the girl, you will see after her, and I shall not attempt to explain matters to her, for I begin to believe that she hears with her eyes."

"She has already understood, I am sure," said Saint-Senier, who had been watching all the impressions reflected on Régine's countenance.

"Then, away we go!" cried Bourdier, almost gaily.

Suiting the action to the word, he crossed the waggon road and stepped on the field it bordered. It was a vast mead whence all trace of culture had disappeared. Armies had come this way, for there were practically dug trenches and imperfect breastworks. Like locusts, the soldiery had gathered the harvest and destroyed the very roots. At every step traces of the invasion were to be met, and though but a few leagues from Paris, this plain that had erstwhile been cultivated like a garden, one might have believed to be a Breton heath. Bourdier trudged on leisurely, scanning the horizon, and often stopping to stoop and better get his bearings. Roger, who had not forgotten his instructions, and Régine, who seemed to have surmised them, scrupulously imitated his slightest movements. They seemed a file of soldiers obeying the same order like automatons, and the game of follow-my-leader would have been comic if their lives had not been the stake. The field, which extended a little over half a mile, was traversed without impediment. At the end rose up a scanty hedge, preceeded by a shallow ditch. After a moment employed in scrutinizing the environs, Bourdier glided into the ditch, and followed it, stooping, to the end of the hedge. Here he softly popped out his head to make sure that the woody barrier masked no enemies, and went beyond. Needless to say that his two companions had imitated him in every respect. On the other side of some stunted elms, marking the extremity of the plain, there was a series of enclosures surrounded with palings, and no doubt forming market gardens. Two footpaths traversed them, and ran out of sight in the shadow cast by a group of low houses.

Obstacles commenced here. These rural buildings seemed abandoned, no sound came from them, and no light gleamed within. But the Prussians were men capable of going without fires in the dead of winter if ordered to do so; and the messenger, who knew them thoroughly, deemed it prudent to give the house a wide berth. Instead of taking one of the paths before him, he turned to the left where the ground seemed flat, stretching as far as the eye could reach. After three quarters of an hour's march, rendered painful by the necessity of bending down, the fugitives distinctly beheld a long ridge which at a distance resembled the outline of a fortified work. Roger conjectured this to be the Pontoise road, mentioned by the courier, which crossed the low land on a higher level. He knew that it was one of the most annoying points in their flight, and his wariness increased. He soon saw Bourdier stop a few seconds to collect himself, and then bend down and slink like a wolf, to the foot of the embankment of the roadway. There he went down on all fours and climbed the slope with all sorts of precautions. Roger and the girl, still regulating their actions by his, got to the bottom just as Pierre reached the top. He waited there a moment and disappeared without rising up, after making a gesture with his hand, which they interpreted as an order to be very prudent. Whatever the officer thought, he did not hesitate to conform to the settled agreement by imitating the messenger. He and Régine crawled up the embankment side by side, until they reached the level of the highway.

From this culminating point a good view could be obtained, and Roger,

continuing to act like his brave leader, carefully inspected the ground. It was indeed the road, the once imperial one, broad and macadamised. To the right, it stretched out indefinitely, dividing like a white line the darksome fields. On the contrary, to the left, at a hundred paces or so from where he and Régine lay, it was closed by a barricade reaching right across it. He did not at first recognise the nature of the obstruction, but on looking more intently, he believed it was a pile of tree stumps. Soon a regular, heavy tramp struck his ear. There was no mistaking that. An unlucky chance had brought the trio within a few yards of a Prussian barricade, and the sound heard by the lieutenant was produced by the sentinel's boot-heels as he marched to and fro. Of Pierre Bourdier, the officer could not see a sign ; he seemed to have flitted away like a phantom.

XXIX.

It was a grave dilemma. To cross the open road, at a hundred paces from a sentry, seemed a highly hazardous operation for anyone to undertake. It was not dark enough for anybody on the light coloured road to escape being noticed. By experience the officer knew that the Prussians had good eyes and that they were not always clouded with the fumes of Argenteuil wine as had been the case at Sarrazin's mill. Still Pierre Bourdier must have got across without discovery, inasmuch as he was not to be seen ; and Roger remembered his last counsel.

"I have pledged my word to act exactly as he does," he thought, "I should break an order if I departed therefrom."

He employed several seconds in thinking of the best means of getting across this dangerous point and examining the ground. The arrangement of the barricade was to be taken into account. Was the soldier whom he distinctly heard walking, though not seen, in front of or behind it ? On reflection he thought that the guard to defend the hastily thrown up obstacle, could only be posted in its rear. Indeed, it rose on the left of the fugitives and the road to their right led to Paris. The Germans could not expect an attack from villages in the direction of Pontoise, all occupied by themselves, and the fortification reared to bar this important thoroughfare ought to face the French lines. Courberrie, Nanterre and Mont Valérien were forward on the right. It was even very lucky that chance had not led the adventurers to the other side of the felled trees. Throughout the war, the various roads and by-ways were skilfully and carefully watched. Barriers, pitfalls, crows feet, everything came into play, even to wires stretched a little off the ground so as to trip up surprise parties in night attacks. It was almost a miracle that the guide had not fallen into one of the traps which formed part of the new defensive tactics of the Prussian army. However, Roger had some chances of escaping the view of the sentinel whose observation would be partly intercepted by the barricade, but still great precaution was necessary. Again, time was precious and there was none for deliberation. So the lieutenant nudged Régine's elbow to warn her and started across the point, beginning with a gentle advance on hands and knees. He took heed to place himself on the left of the girl, who had steadfastly imitated him, so that he might be her buckler in case of a shot. The road was broad and this quadrupedal locomotion was necessarily very painful on a frozen ground paved with broken granite and flint. The sentinel's steps continued to ring out amid the deep hush of night.

"So long as he does not halt," reasoned Saint-Senier, "we shall have nothing to fear, for that will signify that he has not seen us."

About half-way across the road, he discovered that the bulwark was nearer than he calculated, for he had heard the soldier humming a Tyrolean air. A little farther on he could even distinguish several voices speaking which was a fresh proof that the foe suspected nothing. If they did, they would not have amused themselves in gossiping, with French people only a few paces away. The latter had got close enough to the farther side of the road to see that the embankment ended in as steep an incline as the place they started from. Twenty feet below the plain went on anew, so that the highway formed as it were a dam. At the moment they had but half-a-dozen yards to cover to attain the declivity, and then be out of hostile view, the sentry's tramp ceased. He had stopped. The fugitives hurried on to reach the protective slope the quicker, and yet they had to move all the more carefully too.

"*Wer da?*"

This sonorous call rang suddenly out from the breastwork, a German challenge, which sounded in Saint-Senier's ears like a funeral knell. The sentry had evidently noticed something moving on the road, and was making ready to fire. A bullet might come at any moment and it was not advisable to wait for it. Roger sprang forward, as well as one can spring on all fours, and the acrobat's pupil did not remain behind. Still this quick movement might not save them. Germans are tenacious-minded; it was more than likely that the disappearance of the object perceived by the sentry would not satisfy their curiosity, and that they would leave their rampart to see whom they had to deal with. Whilst this idea, anything but encouraging, was worrying the officer's mind, he heard a loud barking close to him. Smothered laughter answered it from the barrier, and some German words reached Roger, who judged by the word *hund* (hound) that they set it all down to a dog. He was already on the edge of the causeway, and had merely to slide down, which he did, congratulating himself on the representative of the canine race having intervened in so timely a way. To his profound stupefaction he glided into the arms of Pierre Bourdier. Régine reached the bottom at the same time.

"What, are you here?" asked Roger in an undertone.

"Yes, waiting, for I did not suppose you would want me, and I was not wrong. What a game I've been having with them, eh?"

"What! was the dog—"

"I'm the bow-wow, of course! I am not bad at it, and this is not the first time I have had those thick-headed Prussians with that dodge."

"I only hope they will not see through it," muttered the lieutenant, wonder-stricken at so much skill.

"Not they! If you were as well acquainted with the Germans as I am, you would know that when they have a barrier up, they don't venture out of it without having good reasons to take to the open. They will not amuse themselves with a doghunt, I warrant you."

The stillness overhead indicated that the speaker made no mistake, and that the barricade-guards thought no more of the incident.

"Now, what next?" demanded Saint-Senier after a rather long pause.

"Wait a minute or so longer to recover breath, and then on again."

"Do you still hope to get through without accident?"

"Hope! bless your heart, I am all but sure. Let me tell you that we can now hardly be three miles from Bezons."

"Ay, but it seems to me that's the worst part of our journey. The village must be occupied, and barricaded everywhere, and to judge by the meeting we have just had, it will not be easily passed."

"Don't worry yourself! I know the place, and there's a path to take us down to the waterside without the Prussians even suspecting there are Frenchmen in the neighbourhood. I wish that was all that bothered me," added Pierre with a sigh, "then I should be certain to drink some coffee, in a couple of hours to come, with our riflemen at Petit-Nanterre, whereas—"

"Go on," said the anxious officer.

"There's something else."

"What, what?"

"The Seine, of course! which we have to cross again, worse luck!"

"I was not thinking of that," said the officer sadly, his brain wearing under all these perplexities.

"Is it frozen over or not? that's the rub," resumed the secret envoy.

This went on at the base of the embankment, and naturally the friends, standing with their backs to it spoke in whispers, while Régine, seated at their feet, looked at them.

"The wind is still due north," said Bourdier, eyeing the sky, "and the glass has certainly gone down whilst we have been on the road. We should be deuced unlucky if a river, so choked up with ice as we saw it over there, were not frozen in such as this weather."

"God grant it," murmured Roger.

"Anyhow, we must step out," said the army messenger, rising. "It's the same order as for the last bit, comrade."

He stole along the foot of the embankment warily, of course, and away from the barricade.

A hundred yards off, he cut across the fields again. Saint-Senier and the girl dogged him at a short distance. After half-an-hour's quick march they saw him stop and beckon them forward.

"There's the Seine before you," he muttered in a low voice when the officer was beside him.

Their fate was in the balance.

XXX.

FROM where Bourdier stopped, a hundred yards forward and on the left hand, they could espy the first houses of the village of Bezons. The Prussians had taken no pains to dissemble their presence, as they occupied, in force, this point, important by reason of the proximity of the French advanced posts. Lights glimmered from many a window, and the sky was reddened by the reflection of a huge watch-fire. It is true that they believed themselves unassailable from the plain, and reserved their ordinary precautions for the part of the hamlet bordering the river. There its waters alone separated the pickets of the two nations; hence, you will understand, the houses near the bridge remained unlighted, and the silence on the riverside was only broken by the shots exchanged, at times, by the outposts. Though the fugitives' presence had not yet aroused the attention of any look-out, Lieutenant de Saint-Senier was not at ease, and, although he strenuously cudgelled his brain, he could not see how his guide meant to cross through a barricaded village full of soldiers. A clump of trees rose

up, only a little distance from their halting-place, and at the foot of some old elms in a half-circle, a whitish building stood up, dimly.

"There you are," observed the courier.

"What?"

"There's our road."

The officer did not understand; there was mention of a road, and he saw nothing but a wall. Nevertheless, he had become so used to Bourdier's peremptory assertions, and he had such perfect faith in the sureness of his eye, that he did not make an observation.

"You are going to see if I was wrong in promising you that we should pass under the nose of the Prussians without their being any the wiser," proceeded the despatch-bearer. "Come on, but softly, for these rogues are all around, and they have good eye-sight."

He resumed the march, with his followers close behind, in a straight line for the trees, over a sloping ground cut up by hedges, fences, and heaps of rubble. Bourdier stooped while in the open, and skilfully profited by all the raised objects which might serve as shelter. Thus they arrived at the brink of a pool, on the other side of which rose up the wall seen from afar. It was not difficult to recognise the intent of this artificial pond, bordered with flat stones. It could only be a watering-pond or washing-place, but whatever its exact destination, it was not in use just now for it was frozen over.

"This is a good omen," commented the officer, pointing out the solid surface to Bourdier who joined him.

Two or three large stones, rolled on by the Prussians in sheer playfulness, had not made the ice even crack, so it seemed as if its resistance could be relied upon.

"The Seine does not get ice bound like a fish-pond," laconically replied the messenger, who grew less at ease on nearing the decisive moment. "However, we are going to know all about it."

This rebuke did not much encourage Lieutenant de Saint-Senier, whose stupefaction knew no bounds on seeing their guide gently get down upon the ice and beckoning him to follow. Still, he obeyed without remonstrating and walked before Régine after Bourdier, who made for the wall, leaning on the margin to save himself from slipping. This crossing of the pool took but a few minutes. When they got to the foot of the wall without any slip or fall, the leader stopped, and then pointed to an arched opening.

"Now, do you understand?" he queried, with a chuckle to himself.

"Not much better," was Roger's answer.

"Well, I must explain. This hole that you see here is simply the mouth of a sewer which carries away the overflow when the water gets too high in the pond. This nice little covered way, which a fellow would fancy was constructed especially for our noble selves, leads to the Seine, under the first bridge arch. I think you are fully informed now."

"And do you fancy it is neither stopped up nor guarded?" inquired the lieutenant, shaking his head like one who was little convinced of success.

"Believe? bless you, I am sure. Not two days ago, old Sarrazin came prowling round here, and he went through to see how it was."

"My dear comrade, I owe you my life a dozen times over," said Roger, filled with admiration.

"Wait—wait to clear off that debt until we are in Paris."

"We shall be there to-morrow, I no longer doubt it," said the young soldier, who rapidly passed from discouragement to enthusiasm.

"We shall find out all that at the end of the canal, and as soon as possible will suit me," replied Bourdier, bending down to dive into the orifice, wherein he disappeared.

But he was not slow to return.

"In you go," said he, plainly.

Roger had no need to beckon to Régine, who boldly plunged into the obscure subterranean canal, and the lieutenant passed in after her. It was neither wide nor high, but presented no serious obstacles, and they could get along one by one without too much trouble, if they bent double. This was no hardship for them as they had been doomed to other methods of locomotion, quite as irksome. Besides there was no choice in the matter, and they had to resign themselves to suffer all the consequences of a trip through a tunnel. It sloped down into the river in a way that facilitated the march. A quarter of an hour had not gone by before Roger, at the end of the line, perceived a faint light which was near at hand. Ten minutes subsequently, the conductor stopped at the mouth, and the others came up to him. The vaulted way considerably widened at this end, and held the trio abreast.

"Where are we now?" inquired lieutenant Roger, as he thrust his head out for a peep.

"Under the first archway of the bridge," was Bourdier's answer, "and I begin to think we shall manage the business. See!" he added, pointing to the river.

But three feet below them the icy layer extended. Their direct view was closed in by the first pier and they could not see if the river was frozen over under the second arch. But above and below, it appeared motionless, and the silence all around one sufficiently indicated that the ice floes had been stopped. The question was to learn if the ice were thick enough to bear a man, and there was no other means of ascertaining this than to walk upon it.

"There are five arches to this bridge," said the secret messenger, "and the middle one alone has been blown up. There rises the difficulty, for as long as we walk under the arches, we shall have nothing to fear from the foe. At the most they can only see us turning round the pediment, but I will show you how to work that."

"So your advice is for us to cross straight over?" queried Roger, who could not refrain from thinking of Régine every time that a new emergency rose.

"Without losing one minute, my dear comrade," said Bourdier in a decided tone, "for it strikes me the wind is turning westerly and there's no proof that the frost will hold."

"Particularly at mid-channel," observed the officer.

"That's what occurs to me, and it would be the more worry as that is the very point where we should be uncovered and exposed to two fires."

"How so?"

"Why, yes; the Prussians and our sharpshooters—they want no inducement to bang away, especially at night time."

"And yet you believe we shall arrive in spite of it all?"

"I don't know about that, lieutenant," said the messenger from the army of the Loire, "but it's too late to back out. Do as I do

Thereupon he stepped carefully upon the ice.

XXXI.

THE Bezons bridge, under the first arch of which our fugitives were en-sconced, was the scene of uninterrupted contests during the siege of Paris. Not that it ever served for a pitched battle or even a serious action, for the French troops never thought of forcing the passage of the Seine at a point the occupation of which had no importance. Indeed the peninsula of Vésinet could not have been held by them, and there was no strategical interest in cutting a way to it.

On their side, the Germans, bent on capturing Paris by famine, never had the least desire to risk a rush which would only have cost them dear. They confined themselves to guarding it as wisely and as methodically as was their wont, and for five months long, they had the patience to watch the tiresome river flow without once trying to seek diversion by crossing it. Their sentries were intended to prevent smuggling rather than discharge any military duties. The result of this state of affairs, known and accepted by both parties, was that the warfare on the banks was confined to a series of outpost affairs. It was like a sham fight, with ball and cartridge slipped in by misadventure, and good fun for the besieged, who were able to go to Paris now and then between the acts. To breakfast on the boulevards and go in the dusk to "pot" a Prussian across the Seine was a kind of sport fairly well patronised during this winter when hunting, fowling and skating were not to be had. At last there came a tacit agreement on either side that at certain points it was a reciprocal rule not to fire on the reliefs of the sentinels. This proceeding, a renewal as it were of the Fontenoy episode of "Gentlemen of the Guard, fire first," had some inconvenience for so practical a people as the Germans, and young soldiers were more than once killed owing to their repugnance to shoot down a man like a rabbit. For the most part though, they made eyes at one another without burning powder uselessly, firing only on those who abused the permission to go about openly.

At Bezons in particular the situation was a curious one. The Parisian free-shooters occupied a long and deep trench along the river bank in front of the Prussians, who held the houses situated upon the right bank. A good number of bullets were willingly exchanged to keep one's hand in but few men were killed. It was not till the end of the siege that the ingenious Teutons mounted guns in the village church steeple, which speedily sent bullets into the French bivouacs. This not being considered quite fair, the French marksmen settled down to hard work and fired so often and so well that this joke in bad taste came down on the jokers' heads. There were also intermissions due to changes of the German garrison. The Bavarians were pacific enough and did not cry for more lead, whereas the Pomeranian divisions would not let a head appear without having a pop at it, and wasted many a bullet merely to pierce a képi or break a bayonet that rose above the breast-work. These compliments were returned so hotly that they had to build iron-plated watchboxes and mount them on rails. Each time that a sentry was changed the watch-box would be pulled back with ropes and winch upon the metals which extended to the well-barricaded waterside. There the living contents were shifted for another specimen, and by letting the crank go, the box rolled down to the quay furnished with a fresh sentinel. This precaution, more

remarkable for prudence than valour, did not prevent the French sharp-shooters knocking over some of these sentinels. Woe to the poor fellow who yielded to the temptation of smoking one of those china pipes so dear to towheaded Germany ! Often would it happen that, through the peep hole in the side of the watchbox, a bullet would fly, a target being furnished by some match alight. Then the mechanism would bring a dead body home to be replaced by a living one.

All these details were perfectly well known to Pierre Bourdier, who, since the siege began, had between his perilous missions often taken his gun to the trenches, and more than once blazed away in the vicinity of Bezons. He had even on his full acquaintance with the place and its customs, based his choice on a favourable crossing point. On his departure from Paris, he had left the Bavarians confronting a band of riflemen whom he knew, and he may have relied on the indolence of the South Germans to facilitate his enterprise. In any case, he arrived mal-apropos, as the garrison had been changed, and never had the fusillade been fiercer round the bridge than in the final days of December. The fugitives came up in the midst of perfect miniature warfare, for lately the opponents had grown bitter. A rifleman, much liked by his comrades, had been hit by a bullet in the forehead as he was tranquilly skimming a pot of boiled horse in the trenches. On their side, the Pomeranians had treated themselves to a water promenade concert, of which the enemy had greatly disturbed the harmony. After this exchange of spitefulness, determined hostility had naturally set in. On both sides there was a bloodthirsty longing to kill.

The little band crossing over on the ice soon perceived that the moment was hardly favourable for crossing the Seine *incognito*. Already, whilst threading the underground conduit, they had more than once heard the shots repeated by the echo under the vault. At the moment they ventured to cross the first archway, a shot resounded on the left bank, then a second, to which three separate ones answered from the other side. It was easy to understand by the intervals in the fusillade that these were no random shots, but carefully directed ones. The last ones had evidently come from the top of the bridge, and the famous movable watchbox might be the principal target of this methodically-calculated engagement. The fugitives must, therefore, expect to effect their perilous passage under the keen eyes of unseen sharp-shooters. What still farther complicated the situation was that the danger came as much from one side as the other. Projectiles do not care about people's nationality, and it was not easy, in crossing the stream, for our friends to make themselves known to the marksmen. They had the very unpleasant prospect of receiving a French bullet before they could show they came with clean hands, as the saying goes, to the skirmishers. The messenger and the lieutenant looked at one another with the same idea, which they judged useless to communicate.

Pierre even affected a security which he did not feel, and assumed his most confident mien, as he whispered to Saint-Senier :

“ If we were to linger here for hours, we should not improve matters. The boys will keep blazing away at one another all night, and I fear that the ice will not last long, for it's growing softer. I believe we'd better make a dash for it.”

“ That's my advice, too,” muttered the officer.

“ Good ! forward, march, then ! Only I think we had better change the order of battle this time. Instead of single file, let us move separately, every man on his own hook—a charge at will.”

" You are right ; a solitary man will draw less attention than a group."

" That's settled, and I rely on the quick wit of your little lady."

" Rest easy ; if we are to be saved, it will be by her."

" Now, here's the plan. Under the arches, keep to the middle so as to be in the shadow. Turn every buttress gently, stooping down, and keeping close to the stones, so as to blend with them as much as possible."

" It will be the most dangerous time, and—"

" Not so much as the middle arch, which is broken through. There, at all events, we shall be uncovered on every side. We had better run as fast as our legs will carry us to the first pier on the French side."

" Hard to do so on ice."

" I know that only too well ; but slide if you cannot run. I see no other way. Besides if, as I hope, we get to the end of the second arch safely, we can pause there a while to study the road, and hold a last council. Upon which, off is the word, dear comrade, for there's a thaw coming."

" Off ! " repeated Roger, " and God protect us."

The fusillade continued at intervals as they started.

XXXII.

To cross under the first arch was easy enough. It was dark, and as the riflemen on both sides were placed they could only with great difficulty see what went on beneath the sheltering roof. Again, the Seine near the bank had frozen before it caught in the centre, and the ice there was quite solid and perfectly even. Hence the trio arrived at the first pediment without event. The gunshots, rare enough, came mostly from the French side, and without the least uneasiness as to their personal safety, the fugitives heard the peculiar whizzing of the chassepot missiles.

To overcome the first obstacles they parted company. Bourdier started to go round by the left, and Saint-Senier by the other side. Régine naturally followed her cavalier. The bridge was built upon large piles of hewn stone, which presented a palpable swell and angle. The course was marked out by the obstacles. Roger dropped flat on the ice, and slowly crawled round the salient spur to slink in under the second arch—the work of a few seconds and marvellously successful. As he rose to reach the other side of the pile, he had the gratification to see Bourdier appear, after passing round the other side just as neatly. They had to wait for Régine. Her escort had contented himself with setting her the example how to do it, sure that she would follow him with her usual courage and address, yet his heart throbbed at the idea of the danger she incurred in the open. His emotion doubled when he heard the sharp sound of some projectile breaking the ice near him, and the time seemed long till he beheld the girl again.

She arrived safe and sound without showing the least sign of fear. Roger could not question her, but he was uneasy about the shot which had missed her, it was an evil omen for the rest of the journey. The sharp shooters were not so unworthy of their title for him to believe that a bullet intended for the Germans upon the water side, would go so far astray. And as they aimed at the base of the abutment, it was probably because they had seen something move, and their clear-sightedness was not at all comforting.

" What will it be when we have to move from under cover ? " sadly thought the officer.

The army courier drew near and urged him to cross under this second arch without further delay. Roger obeyed and reached the other pile at the same time as his companion, but not without slipping several times. Here they were already a little less in safety, since from the right bank one could glance slantingly under the vault. But, by keeping still, they might blend, as it were, with the masonry, and there were chances that the Prussians, busy with their opponents, would not think of looking down. The critical moment was come. Beyond this last shelter, the refugees would come to the gap left by the blowing up of the central arch. It is true that farther on lay their country. Indeed the last two arches of the left bank belonged incontestably to France, and once there they would only have to make themselves known to their fellow-countrymen. The whole thing was to get there. Bourdier had softly glided along the pediment to join the sharers of his peril and hold a final council.

"Well, lieutenant," said he, under his breath, "it seems to me that we have got along pretty fairly up to now."

"That's true, but I fear that we have been seen. That last bullet came near Régine."

"Pooh! some blunder of a national guard who has come for a night to the trenches."

"I wish I could believe so," sighed Saint-Senier sadly.

"Whether or no, we must get on, and quickly, too, for I already find that our floor is giving way."

The lieutenant looked down and saw that he stood in a little pool. Startling cracks were appearing from here to there on the ice.

"It will be worse in mid-stream," he muttered.

"Well, we'll see. Come a bit on a reconnaissance with me."

He crept again to the edge of the pile.

"Kneel down and let us look at the banks. We are up stream here, in less danger than t'other side."

To tell the truth a keen fire was going on in the principal French trench, a little in advance of the bridge. An instant later, the friends, slinking past the pile, thrust out their heads and examined the space where the last scene in their eventful tragedy was to be played. Luckily, the river was totally frozen; no watery barrier separated them from the left bank. But the ice, more recently formed than at the edges, did not show a level face. On the contrary, cakes were piled one upon another, and this part of the stream presented the uneven aspect of a glacier of the Bernese Oberland. These irregularly crystallised blocks did not allow of rapid progress, although speed was a necessity; and possibly there were crevices which could not be distinguished from afar. To make amends for this, all appeared very calm under the other arches of the bridge. The fusillade had momentarily ceased, and the silence was only troubled by a dull regular sound overhead.

"'Tis the Prussian on duty at the break in the bridge stamping in his box to warm his toes," explained Bourdier in his companion's ear.

"Deuce take him! he's badly placed for us," sighed the latter.

"And maybe for himself too," rejoined the army courier, drawing back to regain the cover of the arch.

They had hardly raised themselves before a shot came from the French side, and Roger fancied he heard above his head a stifled shriek, followed by the dull sound of a body falling.

"Hark! I never thought I could prophesy so truly," said the messenger.

"How?"

"One of our boys has hit the bull's eye, don't you see? and the Prussian has received his final discharge through the peephole of his box. And a lucky piece of business it is for us, for he would have bothered us, not by shooting at us, being badly situated for that, but by shouting out to the other spikehelmets."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Roger, who had not thought of this possible chance.

"Come, come," muttered Bourdier, rubbing his hands. "I am now more inclined to believe that we shall breakfast in Paris. It is true that it will only be on some horse steak, but I am not afraid of that," he proceeded, with that silent chuckle which he had probably acquired while travelling through the Prussian lines.

The lieutenant could not hide his admiration of the coolness of this gallant fellow, who could jest at such a time, and his mirth gave him confidence.

"There's the little lady coming," said the messenger, "now's the time to start."

Régine had approached them, and stood ready for the next venture.

"This time," said Bourdier, "we must rush off together, like a flight of sparrows, to distract the Germans' attention, so that they may not take aim. Besides, if we run fast they will have no time for it. The word is to gallop home—every man for himself. Now, are you ready?"

"Ay," said Saint-Senier, squeezing Régine's hand to signify to her that now they must risk everything.

"Then, away!"

At this command from Bourdier, who dashed round the pile of the bridge, the officer and the girl sprang after him. Without a stop, Roger accomplished half the road, but, in the middle of the channel, he stumbled on a block of ice and almost went down. This all occurred in a second; and on recovering his balance he perceived that Régine had outstripped him, though she had diverged to the right, seemingly proposing to round the stonework downstream. His first impulse was to follow her, but a thought, swift as lightning, reminded him that he had better let her go, and he turned to the left. In a few strides he was past the perilous point. Pierre was running to the left and a little behind. Even as the officer was reaching the shelter of the pier, he saw a gun-barrel gleam in the shadow, and became aware that it was levelled at him.

XXXIII.

ROGER's feeling was rather surprise than fear. He had expected everything save finding an enemy hidden under the first French arch, towards which he was so ardently hastening. His first instinctive movement was to stop, the second to recede. But he had not time to analyse his feelings or impulses, for, on turning, he slipped and he fell full length on the ice; an unfortunate fall outside the arch, so that he was well under the gun aimed at him. Whilst he was trying to scramble up, he heard these scarcely encouraging words, only a few paces from him:

"Fire, and mind you don't miss him!"

Roger closed his eyes and awaited death, not without a dreadful pang at thinking that he would be killed by a fellow-countryman. But almost

immediately, a voice—he imagined it came from the other side of the pier—cried hurriedly :

“ Don’t fire—he’s French ! ”

The sharpshooter under the vault no doubt credited this assertion for, instead of pulling the trigger, he raised his gun. It would be hard to describe what coursed through the lieutenant’s brain during these few seconds, longer to him than centuries. He had given himself up as lost—he was saved or at least living, and, what was stranger than all the rest, it seemed to him that the warning voice had been a woman’s.

“ If you are one of us, quick, make yourself known.”

This request in a low voice close to him, recalled him to reality. He rose to his feet as smartly as he could and answered as sharply :

“ Yes, yes, French, I am French.”

At the same time he took a forward step.

“ The watchword ! confound you, the watchword, or I’ll blow your head off ! ” cried the rifleman, in a tone which left no doubt as to his intention to fire if the reply was not satisfactory.

The officer would have been much embarrassed to furnish what was required, but he luckily had presence of mind enough to say without more ado :

“ Despatches from the Army of the Loire.”

This rapid declaration might not have been a sufficient talisman to shield him from the weapon again menacing him, but two or three gun-shots flashed from the right bank of the river, and the Prussian bullets made the ice fly around him.

This hostile salvo constituted an emphatic attestation of identity, for certainly the Germans would not have fired at one of their friends. It was thus the rifleman understood matters, for, instead of firing himself or even threatening, he answered rather quietly :

“ That’s different. Advance quickly and explain yourself.”

Roger needed no other injunction, and in two leaps landed behind the stonework where, however, a very unhospitable reception awaited him. He had scarcely rounded the corner before he was collared by strong hands and felt his arms being seized behind. In the twilight, beneath the vault, it was rather difficult at first for him to see whom he had to deal with, but he divined that he had fallen into the midst of a band of sharpshooters. Their captain, besides, took it on himself to enlighten him.

“ Hold him tight,” said this personage, coming forward to view the prisoner.

“ No fear, he can’t move,” at once replied the three soldiers, who had captured him.

“ Well, who are you ? ” inquired the leader, curtly.

“ A lieutenant of the garde mobile,” said Roger, who was himself again, “ taken on the 17th of October at Billancourt, I escaped on the day before yesterday from Saint-Germain, where the Prussians kept me in the hospital. I am bearer of a letter to the Governor of Paris.”

This information was imparted in so clear and steady a manner that it made an impression on the commander.

“ Very well. We will verify all this presently in the trenches,” he said, quickly. “ Now then, you fellows,” to his men, “ we must fall back. The move has failed.”

“ But I am not alone,” said Roger, who had forgotten his companions in the moment’s troubulous strait.

"A woman!" exclaimed the captain of the sharpshooters at the same time.

Indeed, Régine suddenly showed herself. After going round the stone-work down stream, that is, on the opposite side to that where the lieutenant had all but lost his life, she had glided noiselessly along the wall and finally reached the group.

"Yes, a woman, one who helped me to escape from Saint-Germain," the lieutenant hastened to respond.

"And one who has again saved your life just now," said one of the sharp-shooters, "if she had not called out, I should have blown out your brains."

"Called out! impossible! she is dumb," exclaimed the officer.

"Dumb," repeated the soldier, "that's odd—but wait a bit! I remember—"

"But where's the other?" inquired the lieutenant.

"What other?"

"My comrade, my friend, a hero—who has—also—a despatch."

It was but too true; Pierre Bourdier was missing at the general muster. All these weighty incidents had so rapidly followed on one another that Roger had not seen what became of the army courier. He had lost sight of him on the ice whilst he crossed under the broken archway, and he believed, in falling, that he had seen him on his left. What had befallen him since? All Roger's faculties instantly dwelt upon the thought that the man to whom he owed his life over and over again, was now in danger of death.

"Save him, captain, or let me do it," he cried, making an effort to shake off the hands still detaining him.

"But where is he?"

"There, on the ice, exposed to the shots—mayhap wounded!"

"It is so—there were two of them, commander," said the soldier who had fired on the runaways.

"Then we must see what he is," said the leader, between his set teeth, "although the place is full of danger for us, it shall never be said that I let a Frenchman perish miserably beside me, if there were a way of pulling him out of the mess."

"Thanks, sir, thanks," muttered the lieutenant, who had had time at Saint-Germain to forget how military titles now ran in Paris.

"Girard, pop your head around the stonework," said the captain to one of his men, without much heeding his prisoner's gratitude.

The man obeyed; after kneeling down for additional security, he gradually slipped his head round the pier, and scanned the icy plain. After a minute, he turned to say:

"I spy him."

"Where? what's he doing? call him!" ejaculated Roger, excitedly.

"Silence in the ranks!" roared the captain, sternly.

"He's fallen into a hole, waist deep, and even deeper," rejoined the rifleman.

"Dead?" queried his chief.

"No; he's moving—struggling like a brave chap to scramble out, but he has all his work before him as the edge breaks every time he climbs on it."

Quite a volley now came from the Prussian side.

"To say nothing of his catching a bullet," added the soldier. "Look! there's one near him."

"Quick! don't let's lose a minute," exclaimed Roger.

"How far off is he?" asked the captain, coldly.

"Fifteen or twenty paces at least, and nicely fixed to be the German's target."

"Then it's one man less," uttered the captain in a tone admitting of no reply. "Ready to fall back, boys?"

"What! would you abandon him?"

To this question asked by Saint-Senier, mad with anguish, the captain replied with this sentence, one of death it sounded to Roger.

"I can't risk my soldiers' lives for a civilian."

XXXIV.

To this rigorous refusal, Saint-Senier could not at the moment find a reply; it was unhappily so logical, for the firing continued and it seemed certain that the unfortunate Bourdier could not be succoured without incurring mortal risk. However, Roger had an inspiration.

"Commander," he said, in a trembling voice, "I do not ask you to expose your men, but I have full right to dispose of my life."

"What do you mean?"

"That I can go alone."

"Where? on the ice?"

"Yes, and I beg of you to let me do so."

"Halloa! you think a lot of your comrade?"

"Had it not been for him, I should have been ten times dead since I escaped from Saint-Germain."

"But you'll only get uselessly killed; the man's lost, and you are not strong enough to drag him here, even if you escaped the bullets."

"I don't care—I want to try," retorted Roger, making an effort to get out of the riflemen's hands.

But they had their orders and did not release him while their superior did not seem inclined to interfere. He was deep in thought, whilst Roger was dying with impatience thinking that each wasted second robbed his friend of a chance of safety.

"Faith, captain," said the scout who had remained on the lookout at the angle of the arch, "you'll have to be sharp if you want to snatch that lad out of it, for I believe he's sinking little by little in the hole."

"Let him sink!" replied the captain, with the curtness of one who has formed a painful but irrevocable decision. "Come along with this fellow."

"This is impossible, monsieur," remonstrated Saint-Senier; "you cannot let a Frenchman perish thus who bears army news, and—"

"But you also bear despatches; and if I let you go and get killed, that won't be the way to secure their delivery in Paris."

"My despatches? I will hand you them. Here they are!" said the lieutenant, quickly fumbling in his pocket and producing the cigarette papers which he held out.

The captain took them with astonishment natural enough, but the offer did not produce the effect anticipated by Roger.

"Listen," rejoined the captain, "your tale does not seem clear to me, and that's just the reason I shall not let you go."

"What! do you doubt me?"

"De-ci-dec-ly. You tell me you come from our provincial army, which

is very possible ; but, for all that, nothing proves to me that you are not a Prussian spy."

Roger clenched his fists in anger.

"Stranger things than that have happened, and if I let you slip away on the ice, I am not sure that you won't take advantage of the opportunity to rejoin your friends, our enemies."

Under this frightful accusation the luckless officer hung his head. He did not feel enough courage to justify himself, but he thought of escaping even if he fell under a French bullet.

"Now then, quick march, my boys !" went on the commander, "and take care going through the archways."

"The truth is, it isn't worth while to hang about here for the sake of that chap floundering over there," said the look-out ; "there's nothing to be seen but his head now."

All was settled, and they were departing when Régine sprang out of the shadow where she had so far remained, and placed herself before the captain. No one had much busied himself about her up to then, as she did not appear dangerous. A woman is of no account in war time, and nobody had expected her to intervene after the leader's decision. He showed even more surprise than his followers.

"Where does she come from ?" he muttered.

Régine responded by grasping his arm.

"And what the devil does she want with me ?" he queried, as she dragged him back.

Nevertheless, out of curiosity, or because he did not care to resist a woman, he gave way. Underneath the span, at the place where this interruption occurred, the obscurity was profound, but it lessened as they approached the opening. Régine now led the surprised captain to the extreme limit of the protective shelter, and then she rose on tip-toe and thrust her face up to his.

"Halloo ! she's never going to kiss me, is she ?" he muttered. "Well, this is a nice time to show loving ways, and no mistake !" he added, half-laughing.

The pale sky's light, reflected by the ice, was enough to illumine the girl's features, and her black eyes sparkled. After an instant's attentive examination, the officer uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"The gipsy of Rueil," he said, bending down the better to see this strange apparition.

Régine nodded to show that he was not mistaken.

"I can't make it out," muttered the captain, becoming more and more bewildered.

But he was not at the end of his surprise, for the mountebank's pupil soon became much more expressive in her pantomime. With one hand she pointed to the sky, the other being stretched out towards the hapless man, who was still wrestling with death amid the ice. It was impossible to express more clearly the suggestion that heaven commanded the captain to save his countryman's life. But he read in her dumb-show even more than a divine invocation, for his memory was roused.

"The fortune she told me !" he broke forth.

The show-girl took his hand and forcibly pressed it, while her burning eyes looked intently into those of the officer, who was a prey to indescribable emotion.

"Ay, I call it to mind," he faltered, getting his hand free to pass it

over his brow like a dreamer aroused, "she foretold me at Mouchabeuf's tavern—"

She grasped his arm again, and brought her face closer as before.

"I know—I have not forgotten—I will be killed before the year's out, unless—I—save somebody's life—"

"In the name of France, do not let him die !" shouted Roger, too far off to hear this, but seeing Régine's gestures and her hearer's hesitation.

He could not divine what went on between them, as the incident at Rueil was entirely unknown to him, but his instinct told him that all hope was not lost. Soon he saw that he had not been deceiving himself. The captain quickly pushed Régine out of the way, and flying past his astounded followers, he sprang out upon the ice, crying :

"Hang me if anyone shall say that Podensac let a Frenchman go under water before his eyes !"

There was general stupor, under the arch, among the surprised sharp-shooters. The riflemen who held Roger no more thought of restraining him, and he and they together crowded at the edge of the arch so as to see the sight. Régine joined them and anxiously gazed at brave Captain Podensac, who ran under the Prussian fire. It was high time he came to the rescue. Though the interview under the bridge had been a short one, Pierre Bourdier's position had become almost hopeless. By ill luck he had stepped into a crack, and his weight had gradually forced apart several freshly joined cakes of ice lacking cohesion. In vain did he exhaust himself in trying to climb out; the crumbling and yielding floor failed him whenever he rested on it. The scout had not exaggerated the danger in saying that he was up to his neck in the water. Nevertheless, the valiant messenger had not uttered one cry—had not once called for help. In three or four strides, Podensac was within his reach, and held out his hand.

For an instant Saint-Senier wondered in anguish and uncertainty as to whether Bourdier had enough strength remaining to profit by the assistance tendered him. But soon he saw him emerge from the hole in which he had all but disappeared, get one knee on the ice, and then rise altogether to his feet. The captain's sturdy hand had given him all the hold he needed. The saying goes that trouble never comes alone ; 'tis so with happiness. Rescuer and rescued also had the luck to escape the leaden hail hissing about them. Five minutes sufficed for them to reach shelter again. Roger folded his friend in his arms and effusively thanked Podensac, who gave orders, without protest this time, for departure. The journey was over, and Lieutenant de Saint-Senier felt his heart warm again at the thought of soon seeing Renée.

"But who was it spoke to prevent the free-shooters from killing me point-blank !" he muttered, glancing at the dumb girl who walked by his side.

In the following pages we shall learn the secret.

PART III.

I.

A two days' journey may sometimes be fraught with more adventures than would enliven the story of a tour round the world. There are stirring periods when events accumulate just as there are great moral crises when ideas flock to the brain. During the siege of Paris, for example, the incidents of a scamper through the Prussian lines might be stranger and more numerous than those of a voyage from Marseilles to Japan. This was the case with Lieutenant Roger de Saint-Senier and Régine, and the tale of their thirty-one hours' perils has necessarily taken long to relate. And yet it had entirely passed whilst two or three much more simple incidents had taken place in the capital. In the course of everyday life it often is difficult to distinguish the concordance of events simultaneously occurring at distant points. The task is especially arduous when they have to be connected and clearly set forth, and, when the rule of unity of place cannot be observed, the writer is often compelled to resume an interrupted narrative.

Thus it is that, on the night when the fugitives were traversing the forest of Saint-Germain, Renée de Saint-Senier and her aunt the Countess de Muire quitted the pavilion of the Rue de Laval for Dr. Molinchard's fatal asylum. The day passed by Roger and his companion at old Sarrazin's mill had been devoted by J. B. Frapillon to the scarcely edifying matters already stated but which may be recalled to mind. By a strange coincidence, at the same moment when Régine, exhausted by fatigue, fell fast asleep in the blue room at the mill, Renée, imprisoned in the detached house of the Buttes-Montmartre, succumbed to lethargy. Her odious persecutor, the general agent, came out from the editorial rooms of the "Serpenteau" at the hour when Pierre Bourdier, escaping from the clutches of the Prussian inspector, aroused his companions so that they might cross the Seine. J. B. Frapillon, on leaving the main doorway of the newspaper office in the Rue Montorgueil, never dreamt that other victims of his machinations were making for Paris whilst he was proceeding towards the central inmarkets in the company of Antoine Pilevert. He had long ceased to think of the lieutenant of the garde-mobile, captured by the Germans in October, and he believed himself rid for ever of the deaf mute whom the ingenious Mouchabeuf had so cleverly sold to Corporal Tichdorf a few days afterwards. The cashier was above all things a practical man, and when he believed he had got rid of any human obstacle, he no more busied himself about it than a chess-player does about the pieces swept from the board. Besides, he had other matters on his mind besides retrospective ones, and present cares were of a nature to make him forget those of the past. He was at the critical moment when intriguers of his kind regretfully see

themselves forced to act personally and forcibly. After having woven all sorts of complicated webs, he had to cut all the skilfully twisted threads and had to do so with his own hands.

This is what was unpleasantly occupying J. B. Frapillon. Inclined by character to gentle proceedings, his system was not to step beyond what was legal, and when anything provided for by the penal code was unavoidable, he always entrusted it to underlings. Hence he had charged his satrap Mouchabeuf to abduct Régine. At no price would he himself have perpetrated a crime calculated to send him to a convict colony. To kidnap Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier and the Countess de Muire, he had only employed cunning, and he knew very well, in administering to the younger lady the simple narcotic which lulled her to sleep, that he did not incur the poisoner's doom. But the period for half measures and tergiversations was past. The seclusion of his victims could not be indefinitely prolonged, and before deciding on their fate, he had to fathom the mysteries of the pavilion. Therein was the key to an enigma which he was bound to elucidate, and he intended to reap the profits of an affair so skilfully managed. All was favourable. His accomplices of either sex, Valnoir, Taupier, and Rose de Charmière, had other notions and, besides, they were not aware of the removal of the ladies. In his pocket were the keys taken from poor Renée during the artificial sleep he had brought about. All that remained was to act himself and boldly infringe the penal clauses punishing burglary, theft and murder.

One of these crimes the pursuance of his plan would oblige him to commit, and it might include all, as everything depended on what he found in the abandoned pavilion. His conscience tormented him very little, but the safety of his precious person preoccupied him exceedingly. For this reason he decided to have a body-guard strong enough to protect him and stupid enough not to question him. Master Antoine Pilevert combined both these desiderata, and J. B. Frapillon took good heed to secure the assistance of such a stupid and powerful auxiliary. On meeting him again at the office of the "Serpenteau," he had blessed the chance that placed the man he needed so meetly in his path, and he hastened to win him over with one of those lures which the Hercules knew not how to refuse. The prospect of a hearty meal plentifully washed down would have drawn the disreputable brother of the noble Dame de Charmière anywhere his friend desired. Hence he did not recoil when the generous cashier offered to treat him in a well-known restaurant in the neighbourhood. Besides, he felt the greater need of quitting the newspaper office as the quarrel with Valnoir's two visitors had heated him. His suppressed ire was betrayed by dull growlings whilst he descended the stairs in company of J. B. Frapillon, however the open air calmed him. On reaching Saint-Eustache, he had already forgotten his recent rage and his evening's misadventures to think only of the joyous feast enjoyed by anticipation.

"Are you bound to go to Baratte's?" he asked of his host.

"Why that question?" counter-queried the prudent Frapillon, evasively.

"Because I know a capital feeding-crib in the Rue de la Huchette where they keep a moderately priced wine which tickles your gullet all the way down and I am partial to it."

"My dear colleague," gravely replied the business man, "I intend to offer you something better, and I ought to point out to you that gentlemen who have the honour to be on the editorial staff of the 'Serpenteau' do not go to 'feeding cribs,'"

"What's in a name?" rejoined the showman, vexed at having his favourite restaurant contemned: "at the 'Jumping Rabbit' the company is very select. I dined there yesterday, and—"

"The wine did not agree with you, if I remember your evening correctly."

This allusion to the events which had led to his visit to the police cells calmed the Rampart of Avallon's enthusiasm on behalf of the restaurant in the Rue de la Huchette.

"Oh, after all, I am not set on it," he grumbled, "and as you stand treat, you have the right to choose your place."

"My dear Antoine," observed J. B. Frapillon in a dignified yet affectionate tone, "I wish to speak seriously with you, and Baratte has a private room where customers can exchange a word between some Beaujolais and some Burgundy without being overheard."

"Enough said, and 'mum's the word,' sir; I am at your service till to-morrow morning, inclusively."

"Faith, my hero, I am not going to refuse that, for I may have need of you this very night."

As the tempter negligently cast out this feeler, as regards his nocturnal projects, the two revellers arrived at the restaurant door. Pilevert was too much engrossed by the inviting show which the frontage of this engaging establishment offered, to pay much attention to his new friend's overtures. He inhaled with delight the culinary perfumes which steamed up through the gratings, shielding the kitchen windows, and he was completely fascinated by the sheen of the pewter bar to be admired through the panes. The eating house chosen by J. B. Frapillon also dealt in wines and spirits. There were tables and seats upstairs, but below there were drinking bars, and the business agent had a deal of difficulty in preventing his guest from stopping short in the tap room. At last he succeeded in drawing him up the stairway to the more aristocratic regions of the private dining-rooms. Though gifted with excellent eyes and remarkable observant faculties, the plotter of the Rue Cadet had not noticed a boy in a blouse following him from the Rue Montorgueil. Nor did he even espy him when he inquisitively glided in between the legs of the carousers crowding the ground floor.

II.

THE room in which J. B. Frapillon and his guest sat at table did not boast any exaggerated elegance. The floral pattern wall paper would not have been out of place in a village inn dining-room, the chairs had modest straw bottoms, the linen might have been finer and whiter, and the glasses were both thick and heavy. But, to hold a diplomatic conference, the ornamentation of the place was of no consequence, and the business man relied much more on the merit of the landlord's cellar, than on the daintiness of his furniture. It was no question of dazzling the athlete's eye, but one of loosening his tongue and heating his head. Hence Frapillon, so as to help his projects, ordered as upply of wine proportionate to the thirst of his almost insatiable boon companion.

The ration system enforced by the siege had not allowed him to provide for the solid part of the repast in the same degree. Nevertheless, he was sufficiently known in the establishment to obtain exceptional dishes, and

on his privileged board a fairly large joint of genuine beef followed upon some soup really made from fresh meat. Having been long deprived of such luxuries, Pilcvert promptly forgot the tough horse of every day life, and did due honour to this exceptional good cheer. His jaws, habituated to lifting hundred weights, ground away with marvellous speed and vigour, which did not at all prevent his engulfing the liquor unsparingly poured out by his host. Wine never was scarce in Paris during the five months' siege, and up to the last day the oddest dishes were washed down with first class vintages. It is true that feasting in the days of short commons cost one dear, but J. B. Frapillon never counted the expense when he wanted to make sure of the success of an affair. He had dropped his economical habits that day, and went on without troubling about the bill, which threatened to be formidable.

His aim was as complex as the intrigues he had been carrying on abreast for three months. First of all, he wished to obtain the co-operation of the Hercules in his night's expedition, and he was also anxious to secure him for the future. The connection of the cashier with the "Serpenteau" staff, and the members of the "Light your Pipe at the Moon Society," was rather strained of late, and Pilevert, who was on the best terms with all these people, might be very useful to him. Moreover, he reckoned on picking up a number of bosom secrets, which his schemes had made him neglect procuring aenent the doings of his good friends Valnoir, Taupier, and Company. This is why he busied himself much less with tasting the meats and wines, than with studying his guest. To give the liquors time to operate in the wrestler's thick pate, he at first forbore to open the chapter of information. The Rampart of Avallon, not being naturally talkative, was at liberty to gratify his appetite up to the moment when the Dutch cheese, the inevitable dessert during the siege, appeared to finish off the feast. Frapillon, only drinking for form's sake, believed he noticed on Pilevert's face a shade of melancholy, which the most copious draughts could not dissipate. So he resolved to attack him in the sensitive point by adroitly questioning him as to the cause of his sorrow.

"Well, my dear Antoine," he said in a tone of the utmost affectionate interest, "how do you like your new situation?"

"Not a deuced bit," sharply replied Pilevert.

"Really?" ejaculated the other with well-assumed simplicity. "Do you know you fairly amaze me? I thought yours an excellent position on the paper."

"Oh yes, brag of my position! For ten paltry francs I get per day, and a dozen glasses of beer that I run up a score for, I am obliged to stay from morning to dark in a kind of chicken-coop, where I stifle and row with a parcel of clerks and civilians, who come and talk me mad with stuff that I don't understand. I wouldn't so much mind it if I were allowed to square off and let 'em have one or two from the shoulder!"

"I daresay that would be some consolation," gravely assented Frapillon, "but, at least, I hope you have no complaint to make of my friend Valnoir or our dear Taupier?"

"They're a nice pair! Your Valnoir is a featherweight whom I could knock over with two fingers of my left hand, and yet he tries to sneer me down; and that corkscrew Humpty Dumpty thinks that I take too much drink. Dash it all! if it were not for Katinka—"

"Who is Katinka?"

"Why, Rose of course, if you like that name better."

"Are you, by chance, alluding to Madame de Charmière, my dear Antoine?" inquired the other, feigning the deepest surprise.

"Alluding? I should think that I could allude to her with all right, seeing that she is my sister."

"I always suspected as much, but it is always good to know it as a fact," thought Frapillon, enchanted at hearing the strong man pour out his secrets as freely as he had poured out the wine.

"Yes, my sister, my *foster* sister," corrected Pilevert, perceiving that he had said too much, "and she does not treat me as a sister should. Ah! if I only had my dear little Régine back again! Now there was one any fool could see at once was come of genteel parents, born in cotton wool, and so kind, and not a sou's worth of pride—"

At the remembrance, the Mighty Man of the Arena softened to the extent of drooping his head on his hands and uttering sighs which strongly resembled groans. Little did the mourner suspect that he was wailing out his woes before one of the persecutors of his dear deaf-and-dumb pupil.

"By the trumpets of Jericho, no!" he suddenly broke forth, nearly splitting the table with a lusty blow of his fist, "I want no more of such a dog's life! I have had my fill of their editorial sanctums, where they do nothing all day long but 'spout,' and of their 'Society of Pipe-lighters at the Moon,' where they spin out speeches that last three hours without ordering in one round of beer! And I am done, too, with that imbecile Alcindor, who's riding the high-horse over me, because he is blotting paper all the forenoon and jabbering speeches at night."

"My dear Antoine, you are, perhaps, going too far," expostulated the business-man to excite him the more, "we are speaking of our friends and—"

"Our friends!" interrupted the exasperated Hercules, "not mine much, nor yet yours, I think! Do you know what they said—your friend Valnoir, your friend Taupier, and that long blockhead of a played-out clown—not later than this very day?"

"I do not."

"Well, they said that you had taken all the layings, nest, eggs and all, collared all the money of the 'Moon'—and this evening, at their club of water-drinkers, they are going to propose to put you out of mischief to begin with, and to choke the coin out of you afterwards. It appears that they know where your savings-bank is, and can clap claws on it. No, look here! I like my van better than their show old chap, and if anybody would return it to me with my poor marc Bradamante, blest if I wouldn't do any mortal thing for him."

J. B. Frapillon had listened to these doleful ramblings with lively interest, for the mountebank's revelation as to the intentions of his associates touched him to the heart, and his heart was with his money in his safe, and he felt in no mood to let it be removed. He remained in a brown study for several seconds, sipping a final glass of wine, but his plan was drawn up before the glass was emptied. Antoine's regrets gave him a firm hold, and the astute cashier intended to employ this longing for a showman's life to bend him to his will. The sturdy Hercules' help was going to be doubly and immediately available, for Frapillon had resolved to finish this very evening with the mysteries of the pavilion, and the accusation of the members of the order of "Pipe Lighters."

"My dear friend," he gushed, "I am affected by your chagrin, and it

shall never be recorded that a brave fellow like you, with heart and talent, vegetated eternally in an office. I am not rich, whatever they say, but if you want a couple of thousand francs to set up your business again, come to me."

"Is that so?"

"On my word of honour."

"Then, by all the million myriads of trumpets before Jericho!" roared Pilevert, rising to clap him on the shoulder, "who do you want me to pound and pulverise for you? Must I knock over somebody? Name him, and over he goes!"

"Thank you, my hero, thanks. I make the offer out of sheer liking, and I do not wish to injure anybody. Still, as you want to please me, I ask you to give me the remainder of the evening."

"Oh, if that's all, it's no great gift, the rest of my evening! I spend them all at some wine-bar."

"We will first go round to the club."

"Yes, I'm game; and the first who gets up in their dirty speaker's box to say a word against you, I'll flatten him down with a pat of my bunch of fives."

"I hope that will not be necessary, and that we can go afterwards—"

"Where, governor?"

"Elsewhere," rejoined Frapillon, tersely. "It is eight o'clock. Let us be off. I will pay at the counter, and we will have a cup of coffee on the road."

III.

THE locality where the "Lighters of Pipes at the Moon" assembled, was naturally where the society had the most adherents. It was in a cheap ballroom on the outer boulevard at the foot of the Buttes Montmartre that the meetings were held. They were sometimes secret and sometimes public, according to whether the heads of the association wished to act by eloquence on the minds of the lovers of Communism, or discuss in a family council the minor affairs of the committee. For the general assemblages were reserved the patriotic harangues, which preached defence to the uttermost, and a sortie of all the Parisians to overpower the besiegers. They also hearkened to fantastic economists, who expounded novelties in food, and volunteer inventors, who offered the country marvellous devices. In reality, these were merely "the patter at the door," as Pilevert would say in his show language, good to gently prepare the numbskulls who came to take it all in, to serve thereafter the subversive designs of the masters of the "Moon." The earnest sessions, where were openly proposed the means of upsetting authority, destroying infamous Capital, *fusioning* the stores in common, and making property universal, were held only for the adepts, and nobody was admitted without the password. There was no need to change the hall, for the one selected lent itself perfectly well to either end. The ballroom had two entrances: a large one on the boulevard, and a small one in a side street. Either was opened as the case required. Sometimes, even, after a public gathering consecrated to the innocent babbling of the social and democratic tribunes, the members went out ostensibly at the close, only to re-enter the hall an hour afterwards by the back-door, purified of the profane.

J. B. Frapillon was assiduous enough at the public meetings, and never missed the secret ones. He figured advantageously at the former as captain in the national guards, and did not disdain to take a part in strategetic discussions. But in the private committees, his holding the money-bag assured him a preponderance in the deliberations, for, in conspiracies, money is, more than anywhere else, the sinews of war. On leaving the restaurant where he had dined with the showman, he did not exactly know the nature of the meeting announced for that evening, but Pilevert's revelations had let him believe that a private session was to be held. Hence, on arriving on the outer boulevard, he was rather surprised to see the crowd before the grand entrance. The portico illumination was not dazzling. One lamp lighted up the portals, through which the lovers of political eloquence streamed like shadows into the long passage which led to the hall. As it was nearly eleven o'clock, the meeting should have been about over, for the dinner had been immeasurably prolonged. Frapillon had had plenty of time on the road to complete the conquest of the Hercules, so he intended to make use at once of his willingness. Not only was the brother of Rose de Charmière eager to blindly serve the man who promised to restore him his show-van and his horse, but, by the most lucky of chances, he was not drunk. He had imbibed just enough to be ready for anything, and yet not enough to injure the success of an enterprise. The business-agent decided to go in, however. He did not intend to visit the pavilion before midnight, in order to be sure of nobody disturbing him. So he had time before him, and he could not better employ it than by witnessing the public meeting. He suspected, to boot, that there would be a private counciliabulum afterwards, and he was not sorry to hear, *incognito* for once, those debates which he had often directed as chairman.

"Now then, my dear Antoine," he said to his new ally, "join the crowd and let us try to get a good place, though I see it is a full house."

"It's a staggerer!" grumbled Pilevert, "I understood that it was going to be all on the quiet this time."

"Pshaw! we shall find out. Let us go in anyhow."

This colloquy passed under the trees of the centre side-walk of the avenue, then occupied by the barracks of the country militia. There were enough passers-by to prevent them remarking the presence of the boy who had followed them from the Rue Montorgueil to the market and thence hither. This persistent spy mingled with the throng, still without being perceived, and followed in at the heels of Frapillon and his satellite. The gathering was numerous and presented a curious sight. The uniform of the national guards was in the majority, but women were not scarce, and some must have fallen into the habit of coming to pass the evening here regularly, as they brought their needle-work like the knitting women of the Jacobin Club of 1793. The two new-comers slipped in among the last ranks—not without trouble—of what we may call the pit, for the place boasted galleries, which gave it a theatrical aspect. The stage was represented by a platform sustaining the desk for the chairman and two supporters, and the table fated to suffer the bangs of excited orators stood more forward like the prompter's box in opera-houses. On this occasion, Taupier was presiding, his grotesque shape almost disappearing between two fat warriors who flanked him closely. On perceiving him, the showman, who felt but scanty fondness for him, indulged in some disapprobative "hootings" which the prudent Frapillon hastened to suppress to avoid attracting the bystanders' attention. But Pilevert's bad humour moved him again, on his seeing an

ill-jointed body, which belonged to his former clown Alcindor, approached the platform.

"Trumpets of Jericho!" he hissed between his teeth, "I must be out of luck to drop in here just to hear that fool's rubbish."

The public, however, did not appear to be of his mind, for a flattering buzz greeted the new spokesman's advent.

"Don't you know," said one lady to her crony, "that's the lanky individual who makes it so clear that we ought to divide the money of the aristocrats amongst us."

"Ay, ay; who speaks like a book," responded the other gorgon, "he is quite right, but he is too long-winded and that sickens me."

"Letting that pass, if they would only do what he says, it appears we should enjoy one thousand a-year!"

"Without doing any work?"

"Not a stroke at anything. The rich would have to turn to for that."

"Believe that, old girl, and you'll drink Adam's ale for Strasbourg beer!" yelled a shrill voice all of a sudden between the spectators.

"Put out that boy!" shouted the audience.

But the rows were so serried that the irreverent interrupter escaped expulsion.

Besides the humpback solemnly rang his bell and succeeded in obtaining silence.

"I call upon Citizen Alcindor Panaris," gravely uttered Taupier, clearly relishing the performance of his office.

The ex-Merry-Andrew shifted himself from one foot to the other, and combed his lank hair with his fingers like a guest adjusting himself before he enters the ballroom. On hearing his name from the chairman, he stepped forward with all the grace of which he was capable, slightly saluted the audience, leaned one hand on the table and began with a most winning voice:

"Citizens!"

But he had hardly more than uttered this conventional address before a hubbub arose at the back of the hall. The mob undulated under the pressure of one man who plied his elbows to cleave the press, and outcries came from every part.

"Mind what you are about!"—"You are on my foot, citizen!"—"None of your shoving!"—"What does he want?"

The origin of all the tumult seemed to little reck what clamour he excited and what objurgations he culled on his passage. By pushes and even blows, he succeeded in cutting through the pack by the door and gaining the rows of the seated hearers. Frapillon, who witnessed the unforeseen entrance with much curiosity, watched the stranger impudently climb up the platform steps and stoop down to the chairman's ear, and he listened to with some deference. Alcindor tranquilly awaited the end of that communication, eyeing the audience with a self-satisfied mien. They were agitated by curiosity, and so evidently expected an explanation that President Taupier soon granted it in these terms:

"Citizens," he said, rising, "the citizen national guard asks to make an interesting communication."

IV.

A TREMOR of impatience ran through the meeting on seeing the new-comer take the platform. The tall, grim Alcindor did not seem to share the general satisfaction, annoyed as he was at being compelled to curb the fiery steed of his eloquence.

"Citizens," said the new orator who eclipsed the jack pudding politician, "I bring you great news!"

After this promising prelude, the speaker paused to whip up the legitimate curiosity of his hearers. His expectation was not ill-founded, as a deafening explosion of confused but approving shouts made the old walls shake.

"Speak! speak!"—"Three cheers for the home-guard!"—"Long live the rampart snail!"—"Great news! he must have killed old Bismarck."

The uproar was soon quenched by "Hush! order there!" prolonged till silence ensued.

"Citizens," resumed the news-bearer, "I have to announce to you—"

Again he stopped, like a consummate actor wishful to take one *beat* more before delivering the telling word, but this time the oratorical artifice was not to the listeners' taste.

"Why, the old ass is a bore!"—"Let's have your news straight, it's too long getting ripe!"—"Sharp's the word, lazy bones!"

The invectives, the last one due to the urchin's shrill voice, urged on the orator into forcing his voice so that it should thunder over the rest.

"I announce to you a great victory of the Army of the Loire," he said.

He had hardly finished before indescribable enthusiasm overwhelmed his audience. The seated ones sprang up and the others swayed about so that the mass undulated like the waves of the sea. Frapillon's two old lady neighbours brandished their knitting-needles so as to raise apprehensions as regarded the bystanders' eyes, and in their motion the gallery auditors dropped their caps and shawls.

"Yes, citizens," continued the national guardsman, not wishing to let the emotion have time to cool, "the Prussians have left thirty thousand men on the battle-field and fifteen thousand prisoners. The rest are in flight and Prince Frederick Charles has been killed."

Amid the cheers and gleeful tumult following this astounding piece of intelligence, however, several sceptical remarks were mingled.

"Oh, fifteen thousand prisoners again—the same old bouncer!"—"Bah! it is a fixed figure, like for the ready made dresses."—"What a fine old crusted bouncer," yelped the boy.

Not naturally credulous, Frapillon shrugged his shoulders and the showman, scarcely an average patriot, mumbled :

"What the mischief does their Frederick Charles matter to me? I can't show him stuffed, can I? particularly as our victory will not restore me my nag and the van to put him in."

President Taupier seemed to share his audience's surprise, and he stood up to ask the herald to furnish proof in support of his marvellous tidings. "Fellow citizens," the latter hastened to add, "I should be found lacking in all my duty towards the people if I did not tell how I learnt this victory of our brothers."

"Ay, ay, let's have it!"—"Hark to him! order, will you?"—"Let's, have it!" shouted the incorrigible youth.

" Well, citizens," proceeded the soldier, " I was on guard this evening at the Asnières gate when the messenger with the news came up ; the drawbridge was lowered by order of the commander of the section and the brave courier was taken to the governor, but he had time to give us the particulars."

" I say, did your courier come by balloon ? "

This malevolent interruption goaded the speaker into a fine outburst of eloquence, for he shouted :

" No, citizens, the messenger did not come by balloon--he cut through the Prussian lines amid a thousand dangers, and was received by the courageous Forlorn Hope of the Rue Maubuée whose captain honours me with his friendship."

This time, no unseemly witticism came to trouble the chorus of admiration which pealed from all parts. Frapillon himself felt almost shaken, and made up his mind to gather further information of this freeshooters' chief who could be none other than Podensac, his friend. Meanwhile the harbinger, enchanted at his success, did not leave the platform but seemed to have further communications to make.

" Say on, say on," roared everybody.

" This hero," he pursued, " brought in with him a provincial mobile officer wounded and taken prisoner two months ago."

Frapillon pricked up an attentive ear at this fresh note, for he was always on the alert.

" Yes, citizens, an officer and a woman—"

" You don't say so !"—" It's a cantinière !"—" The Bride of Bismarck !"

" A woman, I say, who wanted to envelope herself in mystery, for deuce word could any questions draw from her."

Frapillon felt a thorn of uneasiness, and yet he reproached himself for that superstitious weakness which made him see some connection between his former victims and the characters in this ridiculous story.

" What a fool I am," he muttered, sneering. " Saint-Senier died in the hospital, and the dumb girl is in Prussia."

" But, citizens," went on the orator, strictly commencing all his sentences with this sacramental formula, " whatever be the importance of the news I bring, I would not have asked leave to speak if I had not a resolution to move."

" Oh, that's it, is it ? go it !"—" Out with your resolution !"—" Shut your jaw so the man can explain."

" Here it is, citizens. It appears that the Prussians blockading Paris know of Prince Frederick Charles's defeat, and they are awfully upset."

" Of course, packing up to go already !"—" Packing up our clocks, too !"—" We'll not let one of them get home alive !"

" Therefore, I propose to you, citizens, to pass unanimously a resolution for every man, woman, and child, with whatever weapons are to hand, to rush out upon the enemy !"

It would be useless to repeat the extravagant words and fantastic means proclaimed by this orator, which were to raise the siege. Alas ! what strikes us as so far-fetched and grotesque at present, appeared reasonable and practicable in the days of enforced fasts and patriotic fever. We shall not add more than a word. Our story is exact ; our characters existed ; but, let us say, the Taupiers, Valnoirs, and Frapillons, formed but a small minority in Paris ; they can be counted on the fingers, and the miserable knot cannot tarnish the glory of bravery, abnegation, and patriotism, which

history has so justly decreed to the immense majority of the Parisians, rich or poor, day-labourers, artists, or tradesmen. To return to Frapillon, Pilevert leaned over to whisper in his ear :

" Governor, I couldn't stand this same stuff over and over again, so I sloped into the side passage yonder, and who should I spy but M. Taupier going up it and cutting out by a door on the jar. I followed him, but I had to stop at a second door that was shut. I fancy, though, I heard him announce his coming by declaring the sitting had commenced. Bet you what you like, governor, the 'Society of the Lighters of Pipes at the Moon' are keeping it up on the sly."

This revelation was like a cut with a whip to Frapillon. He had been summoned to no private meeting of the society of which he was the soul ; hence it was called in respect to and against him. The peril was urgent, and had to be immediately met. He reasoned thus whilst letting himself be hastily led to the meeting room door. On arriving there, he found it to be a thin swing-door, which would allow him to overhear what was said, and enter whenever he liked to. Voices, and even words, reached him as distinctly as though he had been within, and he had no need long to use his ears to discover that he was being spoken of. By the animated tone of the debaters he could conjecture that the discussion had been started some time, and he reflected that Taupier and Alcindor had joined later in the fray. They had, doubtlessly, devoted themselves to preside and orate at the public meeting, whilst the Lunar Pipe-lighters held a much more important session than the outside show. They had barely more than arrived, therefore, but were making up for lost time, for the eavesdropper heard the clown's drawl, alternating with the humpack's squeak.

" We had better finish to-night," snarled the latter.

" Not without hearing his defence," replied Alcindor, slowly and stupidly.

" Why should we bother about his defence ?" resumed the gibbous journalist. " We wanted to question him in the editorial room, and you saw how he ran away."

" That's all very well," persisted M. Pilevert's pupil, " but I stand on forms."

" Like a dunce at school, eh ? "

" I treat with silent contempt this quip out of frivolous jest-books," roared the exasperated Alcindor.

A more sensible voice put an end to their wrangle, which threatened to degenerate into a quarrel, and Frapillon had no trouble in recognising his friend Valnoir's sharp, stinging tone.

" To the point," said he, " you want to compel the treasurer of the society to produce his books ?"

" Ay, ay," chorused a tolerable herd of members.

" Very well, but allow me to remark that you will not gain much by that. We don't want his books but the money."

" All you get of that will not buy a sou loaf," muttered Frapillon, who did not lose a syllable of this.

" That's how I take it," said Taupier, " and if I had not been obliged to preside over those donkeys, I would have saved you the trouble of saying so much to no purpose. I know how to grasp the coin."

The business agent growled with rage and pressed his ear even closer to the door.

" According to your calculations," continued the humpback, " how much has the virtuous Frapillon put away since we founded ' the Moon ' ?"

"At least three hundred thousand francs," cried out four or five members.

"Good ! I reckon myself that's near the figure. Well, the virtuous man in question bought last week three government bonds, payable to the bearer, of six thousand francs each, which represent about your estimate, and I know where they are."

This assertion was welcomed by one of those babblings which parliamentary reporters bracket as "various murmurs." The worthy association was surprised by the revelation, and sought to know what use could be made of it.

"The aforesaid bonds," proceeded Taupier, "are kept in a red pocket-book, carefully locked—"

The treasurer's heart ached to hear so minute a particular divulged.

"And this book has been confided to one Molinchard, who calls himself a doctor, and who is certainly an idiot."

"The rascal, he has betrayed me," moaned Frapillon, obliged to lean against the wall lest he fell, so acute was his emotion.

"Hence I propose this," went on the imperturbable humpback. "At the present hour, this traitorous devourer of our harvest will be sleeping in his rooms in the Rue Cadet like the respectable citizen he pretends to be. He is quite easy because he has got the lucre under his own hand, and on the day when Paris capitulates—which is not distant, between ourselves be it said—he will deny the deposit, and I rather suppose you will not pull him up before the courts of the reaction."

The business agent ground his teeth at hearing his character thus unmasked.

"In such cases, my very dear brothers," said the orator, talking affectedly through his nose, "I only know one method of obtaining justice, and that is to do it yourself."

"It is not always easy," commented Valnoir, in a low voice.

"It is as simple as saying, 'How do you do ?' We have here no end of receipts for the quarter's subscriptions signed in blank, 'J. B. Frapillon,' with a splendid flourish. I undertake to scribble above the scrawl of our excellent friend several telling words, as for example : 'Hand the red pocket-book over to the bearer ;' I will carry the note to Molinchard *instanter*, as he lives only a few steps off, and in an hour I will bring you the infamous capital."

"You shall pay me for all this, you scoundrel," groaned Frapillon, clenching his fists.

Contrary to what he expected, the humpback's insidious proposition was not greeted with lively enthusiasm. The audience indeed preserved a prudent silence which did not evince great confidence in his probity. One voice, however, rose to say :

"Better choose three members as delegates to go and get the pocket-book."

"That's right enough," acquiesced the deformed man. "I am not proud when the interest of the society is in question, and this precaution does not offend me. Select my two supporters and hand me one of those blanks signed by Frapillon, so that I can draw up the order on Molinchard."

This overflowed the cup. The suspected Judas, who had been listening to the congress for a quarter of an hour, could contain himself no longer. He pushed open the swing-door and appeared before the stupor-stricken eyes of the committee.

V.

THE treasurer's appearance produced on the committee the effect of Medusa's head, everybody remaining in the attitude he had assumed just before. Valnoir was reclining in an arm-chair, Alcindor was erect on his long legs, and Taupier was bending over the table to perpetrate the forgery he meditated. The rest of the party, composed of a dozen members, were divided into two attitudes. Those whom the arrival had terrified lowered their heads pitifully, and those of a sterner mettle had instinctively moved towards him. The scene was worth being seen. A long table, loaded with papers and beer-jugs, gave it a vague likeness to Belshazzar's Feast, interrupted by the avenging hand, tracing the words on the wall. J. B. Frapillon, who on this occasion, played the part of the celestial avenger, did not show himself very severe, however. Whilst listening at the door, he had had leisure to prepare his address, and he had determined to proceed by gentleness.

"How queer you all look!" he exclaimed, with a cold laugh which would have made a veteran shudder.

The humpback, who recovered a little self-possession, undertook to answer for his petrified acolytes.

"Well, you understand, we did not expect you, and as times go—"

"You fear the police—very well, but why did you not let me know that you were holding a meeting here to-night?"

This inquiry was put in a good-humouredly reproachful tone, which might have deceived even so suspicious a gathering.

"Why," answered Valnoir, almost at ease again, "you see we could not assemble in the ordinary club hall while a public meeting was on."

"Yet it seems to me that would not have been the first time; the little side-door is still there to come in at after the asses are gone."

"A bad dodge," snarled Taupier. "I hear that a watch is set on us—"

"However, it matters little. This new room appears well selected in my eyes, and since our good Pilevert has guided me, all is for the best."

"Oh, was it that brute who told you—"

Valnoir stopped in time, whilst uttering this exclamation. Frapillon pretended not to hear it, as he went on with splendid calmness:

"I am very glad to have met our champion, for you may well believe that I hastened to see you."

"What for?" demanded the impudent humpback.

"What for? Why, of course, to complete the explanation I began to give you at the office."

"The explanation?" repeated Valnoir, greatly surprised.

"Come, come, we are not going to play warily, I should think," rejoined the cashier, taking a chair and sitting down astride it to face the Areopagus. "You declared, no later than this very day, that the society demanded accounts, and you may readily suppose that I busied myself to produce them."

"Oh, there was no such hurry," faltered the chief editor of the "Serpenteau."

"My dear fellow," pursued the business-agent, drily, "I am not a journalist but a business man, and I can treat monetary questions lightly. I am bound to justify myself since I have been accused—"

"Accused is not the proper word," muttered the humpback.

"Accused, denounced, whichever you like, I am not particular as to the word, and I do not even ask who brought the charge against me, though I may partly suspect it."

In so speaking, he looked hard at Taupier, who bore the ordeal well. On the other hand, Valnoir, the gallant of the fair accuser, Rose de Charmière, could not help casting his eyes down.

"I was saying," continued the treasurer, "that I busied myself at once with making out my accounts, and I would have brought them to you this evening, together with the funds of the society, if I had not been so much engaged."

"Oho, how awkwardly that happens," sneered the humpback, scenting a more or less artful excuse.

"Yes, indeed. To begin with, I have had to reply, at length, to two persons who vowed to exterminate our friend Valnoir."

"Pooh!" said the latter, who had no precise knowledge as to the dispute in the ante-chamber, "was that why that bull-dog Pilevert roared so loudly?"

"Exactly, and I stepped in very opportunely to cry: 'hold! enough!' for the visitors wanted to break through forcibly. If they had only wanted satisfaction for your late attacks upon the army, I should have let them fight it out with Master Antoine; but it was another matter."

"What, pray?"

"Your duel at Saint-Germain with Saint-Senier," said Frapillon, bluntly. "They spoke of proofs, complaints to the police—friend Taupier's name was mixed up with the talk—"

"How did the interview end?" inquired Valnoir, in an unsteady voice.

"Oh, I soothed them by taking on myself to say that you were unwell, and making an appointment three days hence. But that is not what we have to trouble about this evening; let us return to those accounts."

"Excuse me, but those persons—"

"One was a civilian, one a soldier—but you need not worry yourself. I have the means of warding off their next visit. You know that I am not one of those who play their friends false."

The stress laid on the "I" sensibly moderated Taupier's and Valnoir's hostility. They felt that their secret was in the general-agent's hands, and that it would be imprudent to drive him to extremities.

"As I was saying," resumed Frapillon, "those Hectors made me lose a lot of time, and that was not all, that dear Pilevert, would insist in relating to me all his little affairs with his charming protectress, Madame de Charmière—"

"Ah!" ejaculated Valnoir, lowering his head to hide his blushes.

Between the showman and his lady-love, there was a mystery which he suspected, without daring to elucidate it, and he felt humbled on learning that Frapillon had become the confidant of the drunkard Antoine. This was an additional reason not to wage open war upon the redoubtable wire-puller.

"Now I come to our little private affairs," said the diplomatist of the Rue Cadet, in a free and easy manner.

He clearly perceived the effect produced by his adroit insinuations concerning the two leaders of the committee, and now he felt sure of his ground, for the other members were only docile supernumeraries.

"My accounts are called for, I am quite ready to show them, and will

bring you them to-morrow evening ; but in the meanwhile, I can inform you as to what has been done with the funds of the society."

His listeners redoubled their attention.

"I have provisionally converted them into three government bonds, which I thought it prudent to deposit at the Bank of France."

Taupier had some difficulty in dissembling a wry face, such was his disappointment.

"Yes, that's so," Frapillon went on, looking him full in the face, "I had just entrusted them to a friend, but after all, in siege times, the bank is the safer, and there I took them this very morning."

"We were not claiming them," said Valnoir, gingerly, after consulting his associate with a glance.

"I beg your pardon, my dear friend, though you may not care about it, I pride myself on restoring them," said the treasurer loftily. "I do not care to be suspected, and I ask the committee to appoint another treasurer."

This rather unexpected proposal produced an effect on the party which Frapillon had calculated upon. Never did Robert Macarie obtain more complete success in addressing a shareholders' meeting. Approving murmurs circulated from ear to ear at the outset, and then exclamations broke forth until a general concert of eulogious refusals was to be heard. Alcindor who, contrary to his habit, had not said a word, undertook to express the general feeling.

"Cæsar," he commenced in his solemn voice, "Cæsar would not allow his wife even to be suspected. In the same manner our friend the honourable citizen Frapillon—"

"Good, good!" interrupted the treasurer, who was playing with the receipts on the table, which Taupier had recently proposed to utilize. "I need no speeches, and to-morrow—"

He was cut short, however, by the inrush of the Hercules, bellowing :

"The police ! the police !"

VI.

UNDER all rules in France the alarm of "the police !" has the power to frighten the rooks who gather together to perpetrate guilty deeds. Still, during the siege of Paris, the police duties were carried out as platonically as possible by the poor hooded fellows charged with them. At the utmost, the national guards ventured every now and then to arrest people on the charge of making signals to the enemy or playing the spy ; but societies, secret or otherwise, generally dwelt in peace with the authorities. Nevertheless, on hearing Pilevert roar out this alarm, "the Pipe-lighters at the Moon" sprang up as though electrified. Some disappeared at once beneath the board-table, others scampered wildly around the room, whilst the bravest leaped out before the strong man in order to dispute the entrance with the enemy. It was a complete stampede. Alone, Taupier did not lose his wits, but set to stuffing all compromising papers into his vast pockets, such as the subscription list, orders for assistance, and so on. Valnoir was striking an attitude suited to a future martyr of democracy. Alcindor, with his eyes on the ceiling, seemed following through the air the final period of his late speech. As for the eminently practical J. B. Frapillon, he was already questioning Master Antoine in order to understand what had occurred.

"Come, come, what is all this about, fool?" he demanded, for once departing from his urbane manners.

"The p-p-police," repeated the bewildered showman.

"You said so before. Where are the police?"

"Below, on the stairs—"

"What a falsehood!"

"But I'll take my oath, governor, that I heard—"

"What?"

"The rallying call of the cops."

"Decidedly fright has turned your brain. However, it does not matter, I'll go and see," said Frapillon, pushing the Hercules out of his way. "Don't you stir, you others," he added to the dismayed herd, "till I return."

It was a superfluous recommendation, as the room where the committee met had no other outlet than the passage by which Frapillon had entered it. Pilevert ventured to follow his leader, and went out with him into the corridor, where they found Bourignard.

"Now, just ask the old doorkeeper," said the athlete, annoyed at being doubted.

The treasurer only needed a glance at the doorkeeper to see he was the prey to profound terror. His majestic head-gear quivered on his bald skull, and the works of the great Saint-Just lay at his feet. Dreadful and unwonted must have been the event to interrupt such interesting reading. At the same time, however, Frapillon saw and heard nothing.

"Upon my word, I believe you are both crazy," he grumbled.

Scarcely were these unpolite words spoken before a voice shouted not two paces off :

"In the name of the law, I arrest you!"

Despite his inveterate self-command, the business-agent could not help starting. He wheeled sharply, but nobody appeared. The voice seemed to have come from the staircase, and the words had been spoken very gruffly, so as to make them more daunting.

"Did you hear that?" croaked the unfortunate Bourignard.

"I did—somebody making fun of us," answered Frapillon, who knew enough about the police customs and manners to be aware that the officials did not herald their coming so noisily.

"Surrender!" cried the mysterious organ, but the awful injunction missed fire this time.

The voice, gruff by art, had now become a shrill falsetto, and as the agents of the law generally have more manly ones, the treasurer no longer hesitated.

"I have you, you scamp, you blackguard!" he called out, convinced that he had to deal with some playful boy, and rushing to the foot of the stairs.

"Come, help me catch him," he said to Pilevert.

A little relieved, Antoine offered no remonstrance, and the two ran, one after another up the spiral stairway. A swift, light step fled up before them. It is not very easy to run up a winding way, especially when you cannot see where you are going, and the avengers of "the Pipe-lighters" were not nimble enough to overtake the fugitive. As they set foot on the passage floor the intangible joker disappeared into the street, though not without shouting out this menace by way of a parting shot :

"I shall nail you yet, my boys."

Frapillon reached the doorway in two strides, but all he saw was an

indefinable figure skirting the houses of the dark alley, and he deemed it unwise to continue a fruitless chase. The mountebank came to join him on the threshold, puffing and blowing in a way which showed that foot-racing was not among the number of his favourite accomplishments.

"It was not worth while disturbing ourselves for a gamesome boy," grumbled the cashier, whom the excrise had put out of temper.

"Boy or man, he can brag of having scared us awfully."

"Scare ! speak for yourself, Master Pilevert," said Frapillon.

"Oh, for me and the rest below. Aren't we going back to cheer them up a bit?"

This suggestion was not to the taste of the business man. Having had time to consider things, he thought to himself that it would be foolish not to profit by this ridiculous incident to break off the explanations with the committee. In the morning he had once before found it very meet to leave the office abruptly, and a fresh sudden departure would again get him out of a scrape. He had said all he had to say for the time being, and by cunningly throwing out the hint to his fellows that the money was at the bank in bonds, he had prevented all approval of Taupier's proposed search. Nothing now stood in the way of his giving himself the spiteful pleasure of leaving the members of the Moon a prey of profound terror. Furthermore, the time had come for him to proceed with more important matters and otherwise utilise the Hercules' might.

"Let them get over it by themselves," he said, snapping his fingers disdainfully, "we have other fish to fry than cheering up those dolts."

"All right ! I ask nothing better than to give up my stand at the door," said Pilevert; "that jack-ass the doorkeeper fairly stunned me with his book. Just imagine his wanting to read me the writings of a *saint*."

Frapillon's grave meditation did not prevent him smiling at the dogmatic revolutionary martyr being taken for a holy man. But he quickly reverted to his grand project.

"My good fellow," said he seriously, "now's the time to win back Bradamante."

"That's the ticket," cried Antoine with enthusiasm.

"Come along then, quick."

"Whereabouts ?"

"A couple of steps off"

After this concise chat, the pair proceeded towards the boulevard without further speech. To the hubbub of the club succeeded stillness and solitude. Nothing was indeed to be heard save the measured tramp of a garde mobile standing sentry over a barracks, his shadowy form moving among the trees. Whilst crossing the Place Pigalle to reach the Rue Frochot, J. B. Frapillon pondered over his venture and calculated its difficulties. So far all had gone on to his heart's content and nothing indicated that his visit to the garden house would be troubled. Like an actor studying his part in the wings before going upon the stage, the Rue Cadet intriguer reviewed in his mind's eye all the underhaul schemes connected with the plot in execution. He weighed the risks and sought for any remaining gap in his cunning webs. But, sooth to say, there was no such omission, and he found not one bad chance in all those he scrupulously examined. Renée and her aunt, shut up in the Villa des Buttes, could give him no disquietude, and the defenders of the house of Saint-Senier had long been suppressed. Before entering the Rue de Laval, though, Frapillon turned to make sure that he was not followed. He saw not a soul. Quickening his pace and

leaning on the athlete's arm so that the latter could not make off, he soon arrived at the little door which gave access to the grounds.

VII.

THE main thing was to do the work speedily. The Rue de Laval was deserted, but any passer-by might come along, and delaying outside the entrance would be great imprudence. The difficulties began at the very start, for our friend Frapillon was not sure enough of his ground to take the first step boldly. He clearly recalled having seen Renée de Saint-Senier press a spring to shoot back a bolt when she had let herself in on the night of their meeting on the Place Pigalle. But he did not know exactly where to find the spring and in groping he might lose precious time. In his pocket he certainly had the ring of keys he had stolen from the young lady in her lethargy, but he was not sure the key he wanted was on it; and he wished to avoid showing the mountebank the real nature of the undertaking in which he had associated him without consultation. Pilevert was not overburdened with scruples, still he might not be disposed to join in a felonious entry with improperly obtained keys, to say nothing of the aggravating circumstance of it being night-time, which was calculated to alarm him. Hence Frapillon needed to appear to his myrmidon like a man quietly entering his own residence by legal means, and he must not bungle in his presence, for this would only arouse suspicions even in the showman's thick skull.

"I say, my lad," he whispered in Pilevert ear, "just look to right and left to see if anybody is spying us."

"Is it here we are bound?" inquired Master Antoine rather surprised.

"Yes, here, in the garden within this wall," was the cashier's brief reply; "but keep watch whilst I open."

"Bless me if I'd ever have thought a body could squeeze in there," observed the showman, moving to the middle of the pavement.

On turning round, his superior saw him scanning the depths of the street, which was poorly illumined by one gas jet now reduced to half supply. He hastened to profit by his attention being engrossed with this scrutiny to hunt for the spring. The door was studded with nails, and as nature had bestowed on the cashier the peculiar gifts of thieves and detective police officers, he at once suspected that the secret lay in one of these nails, and he ran his skilful fingers over them till his usual good luck served him. At the fourth nail he pressed, the door flew open. Even as it gave way Pilevert left his watch to fall back on his captain.

"Seen anything?" quickly queried the latter.

"Nothing, except something black grovelling yonder on the sidewalk near the corner of the Rue Frochot."

"Ah!" muttered the business man, standing ready to shut the door if need required it.

"I fancy it's a cat or a dog."

"Nay, in siege times, they all go on the roasting spit."

"It's black here as in an oven and I cannot see well, but I'm sure it's not a man. However, if you like, I'll go and see what it amounts to."

For nothing in the world, would Frapillon have let his strong supporter go. He had too much fear that on the way conscience might prick him and that he would not return.

"No, it's not worth while. Let us get in quickly," he said, pushing back the door to have him pass the first.

He concluded that he had better expedite matters. Supposing even that there was somebody in the street, they ran no great risk of being seen if they slipped rapidly through the doorway. Pilevert entered without pressing and Frapillon glided in like an eel. Once within the enclosure, he quickly closed the door which fell back without any noise. Thereupon, he pressed against it to make sure that the bolt had shot home and, being henceforth sheltered from inquisitive eyes, he heaved a sigh of gratification. Now that the difficult admittance was obtained, he judiciously reasoned that the time had come for ingenious talk. Whatever the strong man's weakness of wit, Frapillon never expected that he would lend himself to obeying all orders without some prior explanation. This was not what embarrassed the agent, for he could hatch up lies as easily as most men find good thoughts; however, he had to invent a story that would be appropriate to Pilevert's intelligence. The latter stood up against the wall, vaguely eyeing the linden walk with its garden plot curving round at the end near the house.

"Your garden, eh?" he asked, with a somewhat astonished look.

"Yes, my good fellow, but I do not often come here," explained Frapillon, "and if I had not immense confidence in you, I should not bring you here now."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated the man of muscle, staring.

"Listen to me, my dear Antoine," proceeded the other in a familiarly hearty tone, "you please me and I have no secrets from you."

"Oh, I am as mute as a fish," replied the showman.

"Learn then, my good friend, that this is my little estate where I keep my papers and—between ourselves—my money, because, look you, in such times, a man cannot be too careful."

"That's a fact, in proof of which those newspaper chaps spoke of running away with your savings-box."

"Just so, my dear fellow; which is the very reason I am obliged to keep things quiet. So I never come here save in the night-time and I don't care to do that alone for some nasty trick might be played me."

"Then you brought me along to defend you against those rascals?"

"Yes, my old friend," returned Frapillon, waxing more and more tender, "for I know I can rely upon you."

"Against the crookback and the rest of the gang, I am your man."

"So, I have an idea," continued the insinuating treasurer, "and a proposal to make to you which I trust will not be disagreeable to you."

"If it is to hand Bradamante over to me straight off—"

"Oh, you know, my dear fellow, that's settled; I promised you that and I never break my word."

"Then you are going to give me—"

"Two thousand francs! To-morrow—I mean this very night, if you like. That is just what I have come here for."

Pilevert opened his arms and rushed upon the speaker to embrace him in his outburst of gratitude. But Frapillon, who dreaded an over-powering hug, recoiled, saying:

"This is really not worth the trouble of thanking me for, and, besides, we have no time to waste. Allow me to finish what I was saying."

"Go it," cried the enthusiastic mountebank.

"The horse and the van are ready for you, that's understood; but,

between ourselves, you cannot make much use of them during the siege."

"That's so," agreed Antoine ; "there is no going about among the fair-grounds now."

"Well, until we get rid of the Prussians, I have found a situation for you that may not be unpleasant."

"A thousand trumpets ! anything is better than the trade I am in."

"I believe this is, for it is merely to look after the house at the end of the path yonder."

"Look after that house ?"

"Yes. You will have a very comfortable lodging on the ground-floor-with nothing to do but to smoke your pipe and empty a cask of wine that I will have put in the cellar for you alone."

"Suit me ? I just think it will suit me," uttered Pilevert, clasping his hands to express his admiration.

"Then, to-morrow, I will install you in office."

"And this evening ?"

"My good fellow, now you can do me the pleasure of waiting here while I go into my house."

"All right. Will you be long ?"

"Half an hour, or an hour at the most. You must understand that I distrust everybody, and I shall be more easy to know that you are on the watch behind this door."

"Keep easy, nobody shall come in."

"Now, if by any chance I should want you, my dear Antoine, I will call you by this," said Frapillon, pulling a silver whistle out of his pocket.

"That's it. I shall not forget the call and you can rely on me."

"Shake hands ! to our meeting soon again," said Frapillon, giving the Hercules the tips of his fingers which were nearly crushed, ere he went up towards the pavilion.

VIII.

J. B. FRAPILLON knew right well what he was about in dealing bluntly with the athlete. Like all men in whom physical powers predominate, he was very impressionable to the influence of a strong will.

He knew no arm able to make him recede, or fists heavy enough to lay him flat, but he readily bowed before superior minds, provided they worded their wishes in a commanding tone. If the cashier had blunderingly lengthened out the interview, Pilevert might have offered objections, whilst a bombardment of short, imperative sentences riveted him to the spot. After walking up the linden walk a few steps, the agent turned and had the satisfaction of seeing that his hireling was scrupulously obeying him. The brother of the beautiful Rose de Charnière was slowly pacing past the street wall, seemingly taking his new position seriously and mounting guard in truth, better than the police did, and being much superior to them in other respects. To earn his horse and van, he felt capable of coping with a mob, in which he differed radically from the whilom guardians of the peace.

Reassured on that head, Frapillon plunged under the spreading trees and soon reached the house-steps. It was not without keen emotion that he entered the place which he fancied crammed with more or less valuable

mysteries. To get so far he had been for two days acting in defiance of the laws, beyond which he rarely ventured, and that is a course in which no one ever stops. When one's conscience is already laden with an abduction, an arbitrary spiriting away and a quasi-poisoning, one resolves not to have done all this for nothing, and one goes on to the end. Hence the business-agent was decided on ending the ticklish adventure that very night, and not to leave a nook or corner of the pavilion unexplored. He ran up the doorsteps, and as he had not the same reasons to hurry as in the street, he leisurely selected from Renée's ring the key that belonged to the lock, and turned the bolt back, though his hand trembled a little. But he had surmounted many another tremor in the course of his eventful life, and he went in without hesitating. After leaving the door, just ajar, in order to keep up communication with the showman, he drew out a box of matches and struck a light.

In provision of this nocturnal visit, he had a pocket candle, and by the flickering flame he saw that the vestibule was in the same state as over-night. Women's clothes were still hanging from the hat-stands, and there was a shawl on the back of a chair, forgotten in the haste of departure. Endowed with a very keen memory, he had no difficulty in retracing the way to the room where he had given the Countess de Muire such preidious counsel. Here also all things were in their place. The book which the old lady was reading when she swooned, was open on the table ; embroidery work, balls of wool and other articles of a young lady's diversions had been left on an arm-chair. With one swift glance, the intruder embraced all the simple scene and did not dwell long upon it. He knew beforehand that here he would find nothing that he sought. So he retraced his steps and followed a long corridor which went round the dwelling. During his former visit, he had only been able approximately to guess at the in nowise intricate arrangement of the rooms in this rustic building. He believed that the ground floor no doubt comprised a reception room—the same he had summarily inspected—a dining-room and a room opening on the garden. According to all appearance, matters were the same on the first floor, and he resolved to proceed methodically, rummaging one room after another. The dining-room, which fell in his way, yielded up no mystery. It was bare and chilly, furnished merely with an oak table, some old ragged chairs and two sideboards full of common crockery. The least observant man would have realised the distress of the tenants of the pavilion by this more than plain array, and Frapillon was not to be deceived. But, as he was looking for something else besides treasures, he pursued his investigations without being astonished at the destitution. At the end of the passage, he found the door of the third room, completing the ground floor. It was not locked and he had only to turn the brass knob to enter. Long, narrow, and divided in two parts by a tapestry screen, this room had been so exactly described by his agent Mouchabeuf that he recognised it without having seen it.

"It was here my men grabbed the celebrated deaf-and-dumb girl," he muttered as he examined the place, "and here is the window they got in by. Halloa ! this is out of the way ! it's open."

Indeed, the yawning casement let in the cold outer air which made the flame of his candle waver. Surprised and almost disquieted, Frapillon approached and, putting his light down on the floor, bent to look out. He saw nothing but the leafless boughs of the trees planted round the pavilion and an end of the lawn, covered again with a spread of snow. In the

deserted garden the hush was profound and the obscurity complete. The explorer surmised that the window must have been left open in the evening by one of the ladies, who had forgotten to close it, and he paid no more heed to the insignificant incident. Pursuing his search, he raised the old tapestry for form's sake, made sure that the couch it concealed had not been slept in for a long time, gave a glance at the martel-shelf against which Régine had leaned when, on the night of her abduction, she had seen a man rise up behind her—and, finding nothing suspicious, he went out. He wanted to shut the window, but he feared making a noise and so he left it as it was.

It was now he had to mount to the first floor, and the impatience he felt to finish matters was mingled with some apprehension. He indulged in certain strange surmises based upon some words escaped from Renée de Saint-Senier and reported by his agents, who had also assured him that a light was shown at a certain hour in the upper part of the house. Valnoir had mentioned the odd scene of a woman kneeling before a white pall, which he had seen one evening from the balcony; lastly, the young lady had turned pale and shuddered on hearing of an intention to search the pavilion. From this information and these hints, Frapillon had concluded there existed some secret in the dwelling, but he was undecided as to its nature. He believed he should find family papers, perhaps title deeds, or more probably interesting correspondence, and, whatever the documents were, he meant to make money out of them. But this house which nobody had yet searched, might also shelter some person who had reason to keep unseen, and consequently be disposed to receive warmly whoever disturbed him. The prudent business man ruminated over all these conjectures at the foot of the wooden stairs leading to the upper floor, and felt so strongly the necessity to terminate everything that night that he decided to ascend. The remembrance of Régine, evoked by his visit to her room, made him congratulate himself at being rid of her forever. His reflections were interrupted, however, at the top of the flight by a puff of wind blowing out his candle.

"Dash it all!" he muttered between his teeth, "are all the windows open in this house?"

He now found himself on a lobby, like the one which ran through the ground floor, and the air was fresh enough. Whilst grumbling at his mishap he searched for his matches; but whilst he fumbled in his pockets, he perceived, only a short distance from him, a faint light in the gloom.

IX.

THE light was like a luminous line on a level with the floor. Frapillon had stopped on the landing, facing the corridor. Though seeing the gleam at a distance, he could not be mistaken about it; it was the reflection of some light under the loosely-fitting door of a room on the first floor. Now a lighted room must be tenanted, a discovery that terrified the invader. Riveted to the spot by stupefaction, he instinctively cowered against the side wall, and timidly outstretched his neck trying to understand the sight. He could not tear his eyes from the lustrous streak, it seemed to have fascinated him. At the same time he puzzled his brain to discover a plausible explanation of so strange an illumination. He was sure he had left Renée de Saint-Senier and her aunt under safe guard; the

walls of the Villa des Buttes defied any attempt at breaking out, and Dr. Molinchard feared his monetary supporter too much to betray him. Therefore it was not to his captives that he could attribute this disagreeable surprise.

Had the thing been possible, the agent would have been disposed to believe that the trick had been played him by his partners of "the Pipe-lighters by the Moon" Society. But he had left them in a state of terror deeper than the cellar where they held their secret meetings, if this jesting simile may be taken seriously, and materially it was not possible they could outstrip him in coming to the Rue de Laval. There remained the hypothesis of vulgar thieves having climbed in to pillage the tenantless abode. This he admitted for an instant, but soon he reflected that a room cannot be plundered without some noise being made, and nothing disturbed the silence of the corridor. It became more and more incomprehensible, and he felt prone to believe in spirits. The Voltarian doctrines which he professed, had shielded him against what he termed vain superstitions, and his faith was limited to an acknowledgment that two and two make four. And yet there were beings who had disappeared for some months, whose images loomed up in his mind. The officer dead of his wounds, the dumb girl taken away and sold to the Prussians, rose like vengeful spectres. But soon he shook off his remorse as useless, and reproached himself for the recollection as being sheer weakness. Besides, he felt that he must act. He had not planned so many skilful schemes, and come by night to this pavilion to contemplate an effect of light under a door. His scheme, so laboriously woven, had reached that degree of entanglement when unravelling became imperative, just as a well-ordered drama ends fatally with the fifth act. Antoine Pilevert, who represented the audience, might grow impatient and spoil the piece. Hence Frapillon made up his mind to hasten the final act.

Nothing stirred in the mysterious chamber, and the light still glimmered steady but feeble. The wily cashier congratulated himself on the accident that had extinguished his candle, for he found he was like a thief, who much wishes to see and not at all to be seen. This is why he risked leaving his ambush to venture into the long passage ending with the luminous line under the door. In case of surprise he might hope to beat a retreat in the gloom. He advanced like a wolf slinking on the fold, walking on tip-toe, and touching the wall with his hand. At the same time he held his breath, and he would have bidden the beatings of his heart to cease if he had known how. But whatever he did to inspire himself with daring, he really was severely agitated, to say nothing stronger. By a natural effect of perspective, as he got nearer, the light became less visible for the plain reason that the gap was on the floor level, and soon he could not see it at all; but he would not believe it was out, and he redoubled his wariness. He took not a step without stopping to listen. No sound came from the interior, but his ears had enough to do with listening to outside noises. Already he had clearly noted on the Rue de Laval pavement the tapping of boot-heels, which the frost made peculiarly noisy. But that had gradually gone away. It was some belated national guard heavily jogging home, and nothing to be alarmed about. Shortly afterwards he heard a popular tune whistled, and as the whistler seemed to linger before the garden wall, he gave a little more attention to this street virtuoso. The shrill melody sounded at intervals, then rose still more loudly. At such an hour, and in a stiff frost, the place was badly chosen for serenading anyone with one's

lips. A vague presentiment began to take shape in our friend Frapillon's head. He remembered the laughable alarm given him in the cellar of the secret order, and wondered if the hoaxer, who had given them such a thorough fright, had fancied following him to continue his sport.

"I hope that dunderhead Pilevert will not let himself be duped," he thought; "if he were to take that goose's hiss for my whistle, we should be in a pretty mess!"

But he comforted himself on ascertaining that his watchman had not gone. As he did not hear him walking about, he must certainly have carried his order out with such fidelity as to preserve absolute immobility, unless, indeed, he had gone to sleep, hardly likely when it froze stones into splitting, indeed the bitter blast would have awakened a marmot. The business-agent therefore dismissed his anxiety as to outdoor sounds to bring all his attention to bear upon his enterprise. He continued to glide along the passage, and had the wondrous luck not to set either the floor or wainscoting creaking. He spent over five minutes in passing the four yards still separating him from the door, but at length he got there without impediment. Then he planted himself firmly on his feet, so as to be on guard against any shock likely to throw him off his equilibrium, and he applied his ear to the panel parting him from the mystery. It was his fate that night to play the eavesdropper; but this time he was not as well recompensed for his pains and toil as at the private meeting of the club. In vain did he strain all the fibres of his tympanum, he heard no sound come from the other side of the door against which he closely stood. On the other hand, he did hear a loud knocking at the garden wall gate, knocks that smote his heart like raps on his own coffin lid. If he had not had the precaution to lean so closely against the woodwork, he would have dropped with fright. But to his great amazement this sound of evil augury was not followed by any other. It looked as though the showman had had the good sense not to reply to this hammering, and as it was not renewed, the agent at once concluded that the street serenader had merely given a runaway knock, as schoolboys find amusement in doing.

Nobody had stirred in the room, and the emboldened Frapillon at last applied his eye to the keyhole.

All he saw was a night-lamp on a table loaded with papers and phials of different sizes. The door was in a corner. The rest of the room escaped his eye. But the stillness persisted, which confirmed him the more in the belief that the room was uninhabited. He even surmised that the lamp had been left burning from over night for a special purpose. This might be the noted room where the signalling went on, spoken of by the neighbours and glanced into by Valnoir. It was quite possible that the ladies of the chalet had organised a permanent lighting system. Now or never must he penetrate the mystery. He drew himself up and mused for a moment. Then he decided to stake all on one throw, and he was going to put his hand on the knob when he felt the door slowly open.

X.

FRAPILLON barely had time to draw himself back to the wall, but he did so with so much celerity that the door encountered no resistance. It opened slowly, we say, and coming outwards, shut the spy into a corner of the lobby. To be sure, it was merely a temporary shield, for on closing

again it would leave him exposed to view and possible peril. Despite his determination and self-possession, it was a moment of cruel anguish. The unknown is always dreaded, and he was utterly unaware with whom he had to deal. This door so noiselessly swinging on its hinges was pushed from within by some inmate of the room, and, be he what he might, his apparition was not welcome.

The plotter of the Rue Cadet had no relish for hand-to-hand contests, and, although he carried a revolver in his pocket, he bitterly regretted Pilevert's absence. He even thought of whistling for him to come to his help, but his breath failed, and time was also lacking as it was clear that the combat would be over before the succour arrived. So he kept hidden, and did not have to repent his prudence. The protecting door did not move, the opener having neglected to push it to, and Frapillon continued to enjoy all the advantages of the position. Chance managed things splendidly. The hiding place was both a fort and an observatory. He could repel a sudden attack, and he could see all that went on in the passage in the space between the wall and the stairs. The darkness was not complete as the room lamp threw out some light, though so placed as not to illuminate any great part of the lobby. However Frapillon could see the stranger.

He was a tall, strongly built man, as well as his attire allowed one to judge, for a long white woollen garment, like a monk's gown, enveloped him from head to foot. A hood was pulled up and probably fell over his eyes. Turning his back to the watcher he strode away leisurely, in felt slippers, it would seem, for his footfall could not be heard, and one was tempted to believe he glided over the floor. This was the gait attributed to ghosts, and the stranger also wore the standard garb of denizens of the other world, who always appear in white, as we know. But a man with fifteen years' experience in Paris does not readily believe in phantoms, and Frapillon, whose sojourn in the Rue Cadet had never induced him to be credulous, did not admit ghost stories into his creed. He was quite convinced he beheld a man in flesh and blood, a stout fellow, too, with whom he would have his work fully cut out. But who was this odd night-wanderer in the deserted pavilion? What was he doing in an isolated garret of the house sealed up like a tomb? Why stroll out untimely, and what bound his existence with that of the Dames de Saint-Senier? All these and many other questions worried Frapillon's perturbed brain without obtaining any satisfactory reply. Besides, he was too much absorbed in contemplating the fantastic being whose white form slowly merged into the shadowy corridor. Suddenly an idea struck him. The surest means of finishing with this alarming person was to kill him. He drew his revolver and noiselessly cocked it; but, just as he raised it, his target disappeared from sight. He had reached the stair-case and went down it gradually, just like the visionary hero of "the Corsican Brothers" vanishes in a trap. But the agent little regretted having had no time to fire, for he remembered that the thin partitions of the pavilion would not deaden sound, and that a pistol report would surely rouse the neighbours. What he chiefly wished to avoid was mixing other people up with his transactions, and he knew by experience how little will excite a whole district.

But his position was not tenable, he must take one course out of the three he had to choose from. Firstly, should he enter the empty chamber and explore this mysterious sanctuary intended for the hiding of the family secrets? Nothing was easier, as he could slip round the corner in two steps. But the scheme, however tempting, had its dangers. The noctambulist

might abruptly return upstairs, catch Master Frapillon engaged in the ferreting work, and easily overpower him whilst so engaged. So our worthy friend renounced the notion of self-risk. Then he thought of sounding the signal for the showman who would not fail to run up. But the stairs were nearer than the garden, and if the ghost returned quickly, he would have ample time to strangle the whistler before Pilevert came to the rescue. Hence this chance was not to the business-agent's liking. He, therefore, decided on a mixed course, consisting of following the man in white at a distance, down the stairs, step by step, till he gradually gained the linden walk where he could summon the muscular showman as a powerful reserve. This strategy evinced some cunning, for the main point was to get out of the trap into which he had walked. The worst that could happen to him was to meet the stranger face to face if he stopped and wheeled suddenly, but, in this desperate extremity, he had the whistle and pistol to rely upon. Any lie could be told to induce Master Pilevert to lend his mighty aid and operate an offensive onslaught into the house. This being decided—which did not take long—Frapillon went into action. He stealthily left his nook, and went up the corridor on tiptoe. To say that he did not feel a powerful temptation to look into the room open behind him, would be asserting too much. But he contented himself with a passing glance, and to his great surprise, he saw nothing extraordinary. The table, which he had seen through the keyhole, the lamp left by the night-walker to illuminate it, some long hangings probably screening a bed—that was all he could perceive.

"The man in white is the secret," Frapillon judiciously reasoned.

He was accustomed to move in cat-fashion, noiselessly, and in the dark. So he gained the foot of the flight without the least creak revealing his presence and without any awkward meeting. There he found the street door passage in the same state. According to all probability the dweller in the cottage had merely gone along the passage to Régine's room. Frapillon did not amuse himself in verifying this supposition. He partly opened the house door, glided at once outside, went down the steps four at a time, and ran at full speed to where he had left Pilevert. Once in the open, precautions were useless. He found the Hercules leaning up against the wall, breathing on his fingers.

"A thousand trumpets, governor, you are jolly welcome! my nose is frozen, and I can't feel if I have any toes at all."

"You shall thaw, my boy, for I want your fists," gaily replied the cashier.

"Here they are, the fisties! they can hold out two hundred-weight against any lifter living! What's to be smashed?"

"A thief I found upstairs."

"A thief?"

"Yes, indeed, and I must have been in luck, to get away unseen, so that we can catch him together."

"I'm on!"

"Remember, Bradamante is the prize of this bit of fun."

"Ring the bell and let the show begin!" said the Hercules with enthusiasm that knew no bounds.

"Keep calm, Master Antoine! keep calm! Did you hear any noise in the street during your watch?"

"Yes, but nothing to make any fuss about. Some loafers rapped at the door—just for sport."

"Then come along, my hero," said Frapillon, returning to the house, "I will explain to you how you must help me."

Pilevert docilely followed; but they had not taken a dozen strides up the pathway before they both turned round. A singular sound was audible behind them.

XI.

THE sound was a faint creaking such as a door makes when carefully closed. Believing that nobody could open the garden door, Frapillon imagined himself mistaken: but he soon, and very distinctly, heard a step on the crusty snow.

"Somebody's coming!" whispered the showman, who had also heard it.

"It can't be," faltered the agent, even more frightened than astonished.

"I tell you I am sure of it—hark! the steps have stopped—we have been seen."

What Pilevert said was true, and though he would have liked to do so, the other could not pretend that no one had entered the grounds. Assuredly it was not the mysterious character whom he had left inside. But then who could enter, and by what means? The secret spring could only be known to the regular tenants.

"That idiot Molinchard has let those women go," muttered the business man.

"Let's see," said the showman bravely.

"Take the lead," replied Frapillon, "and wring the neck of the first man you meet."

Master Antoine was full of courage that night. The magnificent promises of his employer, as he already styled Frapillon, had so exalted him that he acknowledged nothing was an obstacle. So he sprang forward down the linden walk, brandishing his arms like a prize-fighter. The ever prudent cashier formed the rear-guard, and kept his hand on his revolver as a measure of precaution. The path was quite dark from the branchy vault above, but at the spot where it began, that is at three or four yards from the little door, there was a space sufficiently broad to be clear. Several quaintly trimmed evergreens surrounded this circular clearing.

"They must have hidden behind the bushes—I can't see anybody," said the athlete.

He continued to proceed, slightly in advance of his employer, to the last bush, when a man finally appeared.

"I've got one!" roared the showman, jumping at his throat.

"Villain!" cried the stranger, bending like a reed under the vigorous onslaught. The mountebank was carrying out Frapillon's instructions with dutiful exactitude, squeezing the victim's throat so that he almost choked him on the spot. The heartless cashier came up and encouraged him with voice and gesture, and the house-breaking which had commenced the expedition seemed likely to conclude with a murder. But a most unexpected intervention changed the unequal struggle. A woman rose up out of the bushes, bounded upon the wrestlers, and grasping Pilevert's coat, succeeded in rising to his level and setting her face against his. He then uttered a cry and released his adversary, who recovered his footing and drew back to assume the defensive.

"Régine! Régine!" repeated the showman, "is it you?"

The lately infuriated pugilist trembled like a child. It was hard to tell whether his feeling was one of joy or fear, for, whilst he extended his arms to draw the girl to his heart, he recoiled as though he feared to embrace a spectre. It was altogether another matter as regards Frapillon. The name pronounced by his satellite had goaded him into unspeakable fury. He could not explain the marvellous return of a girl he believed "suppressed" forever, but he well understood that this return meant his ruin, and he tried to settle the affair before the mountebank was sobered.

"Kill him, kill him, my hero," he screamed; "do for him whilst I free you of this tramp."

At the same time he rushed upon Régine, revolver in hand.

"Here, halloo! none of that, governor! I can't allow anyone touching my little dumb girl," said Pilevert, giving Frapillon a blow on the arm, and thus knocking the weapon out of his hand.

Before the agent could recover from his amazement, the stranger had picked it up and turned the muzzle on him. The Hercules did not try to oppose this rapid move of his recent adversary; he seemed petrified. By merely showing herself, Régine had vanquished him: but to complete her conquest, she leaped upon his neck and kissed him. Antoine caught her round the waist and contemplated her with hoarse chuckles and unusual exclamations, like a bear playing with a bird.

"There's no denying it!" he ejaculated, putting her down, "it's she—my little Régine! I want nothing more now than Bradamante."

"You triple fool!" vociferated Frapillon, losing all self-control, "if you want me to redeem your horse, help me against these people."

But the stranger did not appear disposed to allow this. He stepped forward and kept the revolver pointed at the cashier.

"I'll blow the brains out of the first of you who stirs!" he said with an accent that left no doubt as to his intentions.

As soon as Régine was disengaged from her former trainer's arms, she placed herself beside the stranger as though to show that she was of his party. Then, with one imperative wave of the hand, she beckoned the showman to come and join them, which he did with unexpected docility. Frapillon ground his teeth.

"Here I know you," said the bearer of the revolver, addressing Pilevert, "and you know me, too."

"I! may I be blown over by a thousand trumpets if I ever—"

"You saw me in the Forest of Saint Germain, on the day when those villains murdered my cousin in a duel."

"You don't say that! no! stop a bit, though hang it, why it is you—the officer of mobiles."

"Himself, saved by this girl whom you love—and who orders you to help me avenge my cousin and my family persecuted by scoundrels, all accomplices in a disgraceful ambush."

"Just you show 'em me, and I'll break 'em in two!" roared the Hercules carried away by the appeal.

"I believe we have one of them," said Roger de Saint-Senier slowly, but not ceasing to cover Frapillon with his weapon.

"That's a lie!"

This rash declaration escaped from the terrified cashier, whilst Pilevert mumbled:

"Who? the governor? never! he's a good sort and means to buy me a van and—"

" What is he doing here, then ? " interrupted Roger.

The agent replied with a growl of rage, but the simple Antoine hastened to offer what he believed to be an ample justification.

" I'll tell you, my officer, for you are really the officer, and I should have recognised you at first only for your wearing a smock-frock—I'll tell you ; this gentleman is on his own property, look'ee."

" His property ! there he lies ! This house belongs to my family."

" Come, governor, you never told me that," observed Pilevert, finally deserting Frapillon's cause.

" And whoever steals into it by night deserves penal servitude," added Roger coldly.

" A thousand trumpets ! I don't want to go into that."

" Why have you followed this man ? Answer frankly unless you want to be arrested."

" Because he deceived me with a parcel of crams—he said as how he kept his hard cash here, and was afraid of thieves and had even found one in the house, it appears ; and then, besides, he's a swell—one of the leaders on a newspaper which finds me in ' grub ' and lodgings."

" That's the ' Serpenteau,' no doubt," said Roger, who began to understand things.

" Right you are ! that's just what they call their catchpenny affair."

" I know all I wanted," said the officer, going up to Frapillon so that he could touch him almost with the barrel of the revolver. " Now you listen to me."

" I'll listen, but I shall not answer," rejoined the baffled wretch with suppressed rage.

" I came in here an hour ago," continued Roger, " in expectation that on my return I should here find the author of the crime committed whilst this girl and I were prisoners with the Prussians."

" A crime !" exclaimed the athlete.

" This pavilion was inhabited by two ladies, who have disappeared, the victims of abduction or murder. Where are they ? "

" I am not their keeper," said Frapillon insultingly.

" To-morrow," said the officer coldly, " the authorities will be informed, and I daresay they will know how to deal with the man whom I now arrest here for midnight housebreaking."

" Arrest me ? Nonsense ! you would not dare."

" If you tell me what has become of my kinswomen, I will see what I ought to do ; if you refuse to speak, I shall order this man whom you have shamefully deceived, to seize you, and we shall take you to the nearest police station."

The garden door was only three steps off, and Frapillon might have reached it in one bound, opened it and disappeared ; however the revolver prevented him from doing so.

" Try then to take me !" he shouted, snatching at it as it threatened his forehead.

Roger resisted—the shock sent the pistol off, and the cashier of the " Serpenteau " fell to the ground dead. As the bewildered Pilevert bent over the body, the white figure of the hooded man appeared at the end of the walk and a boyish voice in the street commenced singing :

" Bismarck ! if you don't run away,
All your Prussians we soon shall slay."

XII.

A FEW days after the nocturnal tragedy enacted in the garden of the pavilion, three persons were chatting with Valnoir in his smoking room in the Rue de Navarin. Nonchalantly reclining on a divan, Rose de Charmière was enjoying a Latakieh cigarette, doubtlessly to conform with the Oriental taste presiding over the arrangement of the snugger. Taupier, buried in a low chair up to the shoulders of his contorted figure, held up an unfolded newspaper which he was about to read. Standing by the door, Bourignard, the doorkeeper, maintained a respectful attitude not devoid of some majesty. As for the master of the flat, walking up and down with his hands behind his back, he seemed engrossed in the contemplation of the capricious pattern of his Smyrna carpet, for he did not lift his eyes. Gravity sat on all the faces, and it was manifest that the little congress was discussing an important question.

"Let's have your article," said Valnoir, without ceasing his promenade.

"Here goes," rejoined Taupier, in the pedantic tone he assumed to read his own compositions :

"No explanation has yet been forthcoming of the tragic event which recently caused so much well-warranted commotion in the Quartier des Martyrs. It will be borne in mind that last week, two guardians of the peace found the dead body of a man lying in the Rue de Laval, with a wound in his forehead from a firearm closely discharged. The death was at first attributed to suicide, a supposition based on the fact of a discharged revolver being found near the remains. But everything leads to the belief that the medical report was wrong. The corpse has been identified as that of a perfectly honourable citizen, captain in the 365th Battallion of the National Guard and one of the veterans of militant Democracy. It is that of M. Frapillon, a distinguished legist and business-agent, long resident in the Rue Cadet, and much esteemed and respected by the numerous clients who had recourse to his knowledge. His urbanity and benevolence leave imperishable remembrances to all who knew him. His was the perfect spirit of a just and honourable man."

"Phew!" said Valnoir, "that is laying it on rather thick!"

"Let me alone with your scruples!" rejoined Taupier. "If there were no idiots to believe in funeral orations, the stock would moulder away. To resume :

"J. B. Frapillon was bound to us by tender ties tested in cloudy times and by fellowship in opinions. As the manager of our journal the 'Serpenteau,' he always discharged his important duties with a zeal and integrity above all eulogium, and the services he has rendered to the popular cause, during his active career, are such as can never be too highly honoured. The staff of the 'Serpenteau' is bound to publicly render this merited homage to his memory. But it has also a more sacred duty to perform, that of revenging him."

"You will get us into a scrape with the police, which never likes ostensible interference with its work," observed the editor.

"A deal I care about that!" retorted the irreverent deformed man. "This article will send us up at least ten thousand—and you grumble!"

"That is more important than the police," said Madame de Charmière, who marvellously grasped the practical side of things.

"Now for the third verse!" exclaimed Taupier melodramatically.

"Why should J. B. Frapillon have committed suicide—a man of probity, highly esteemed, devoted to the holiest of causes and enjoying a modest income due to ceaseless toil? Suicide is out of the question. No! this virtuous citizen, this proletarian labourer, would never have deserted the duties he so fittingly performed in the interests of Democracy. If a serious inquiry is made as to the true cause of his death, the latter will be found in the old law maxim: '*Is fecit qui prodest.*'"

"You're speaking Latin to swine now! are you mad?" sneeringly asked Valnoir.

"You don't understand journalism, old fellow. Our readers will not comprehend it, but it will flatter them to fancy that we think they do. Whereupon I continue:

"Our friend was hated by the reactionary party. Hence it is the reactionaries who slew him."

"How beautifully that is written!" sighed the sensitive Bourignard, plunged in deep admiration.

"Well, a man ought to know his own language," said the humpback complacently.

J. B. Frapilon was picked up dead near the wall of an abode long noted in the neighbourhood as a veritable nest of traitors and aristocrats. This pavilion in the Rue de Laval has been many times pointed out during the siege by courageous citizens as serving as the den of traitors corresponding with the enemy. At night beacon lights of all colours have been seen, and search would have been made sooner only for the well-known weakness of our government. It is true that, since this crime, this den of spies has been searched and nobody found there, but the friends of the reaction and of Prussia had time to hide away elsewhere. We assert that it was in fearlessly trying to enter this bandit's lair to unmask their intrigues that J. B. Frapillon met his death. This is why we demand that an inquiry be instituted, not a sham one, but by magistrates who will also be real democrats. If the reactionaries are persistently treated with delicate attentions which good citizens do not always receive—if this inquiry is refused us—mark! *we will set about it ourselves!*"

After this sensational finale, Taupier paused in the attitude of an actor awaiting applause. None came.

"What do you say to that? it strikes me that it's pretty peppery!" he said with unconcealed satisfaction.

"It is purely and simply idiotic," replied Valnoir, shrugging his shoulders.

"Idiotic! go thou and do likewise!"

"Not I! I should never forgive myself in all my life."

"Gentlemen," intervened Rose, "I must remind you of the question."

"The question, of course! is for us to contend properly against the Saint-Seniers," cried Taupier, "for you don't suppose I care a fig for that old scamp Frapillon. Do you?"

"Nor I either, but there's something more than his carcase in the matter."

"The cash he left behind him, the cash!" said the ever serious Rose.

"The best way to lay hold of it is to press the inquiry," said the humpback.

"So that the police may come upon stories which will lead us too far."

"What? the deaf-mute? why, she must have been in Prussia ever so long."

"People return from Prussia."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Madame de Charmière, "we are wasting time in idle discussion when the point is to know where Frapillon can have hidden our money away."

"Nicely reasoned, but if he has put it in the Bank, as he informed us on the evening of his accident, we shall have a deal of trouble to get it out."

"Speech was given to man to conceal his thoughts," said the fair Rose sententiously; "and I advise a call on Dr. Molinchard anyhow."

"We could do that, but in the meanwhile I want to find out Goliath."

"Do you want him so much?" queried Madame de Charmière, who did not carry sisterly love very far.

"Oh! not on his own account, of course, for he is the most unentertaining drunkard I ever came across," said Taupier, who was not a man to mince his words; "but I am convinced we shall be able to learn everything from him."

"I grant that his disappearance is very astonishing," said Valnoir.

"Look here," proceeded the practical Rose, "if I am not mistaken, you told me that Pilevert conducted Frapillon to the meeting-place of 'the Pipe-lighters by the Moon,' and so, our good Bourignard, who was on guard at the door, and who must have chatted with him, may perhaps be able to supply us with some useful information."

"That is the very reason why we have had him up," judiciously added the editor of the "Serpenteau." "Come along, Master Bourignard, let's have your evidence."

The porter, who had heard all this with rare discretion, took three steps forward, and bowed politely without any loss of dignity.

"Citizens," he said, "I am ready to state—"

"Drop your cold-drawn solemnity," shouted the humpback, "and tell us plainly what that brute Pilevert said to you."

"Nothing!" laconically replied the porter, wounded in his concit as a narrator.

"Nothing isn't much and you are making game of us, you old swabber and sweeper."

"Citizen Taupier, I beg to remark—"

"Don't beg here, but explain to us how the police swooped on the cellar and carried away old Frapillon. It doesn't look clear to me yet."

"Citizens, in the first place we heard a voice—"

But the story was snufcd short at the first flicker by the shrill voice of young Agricola, who suddenly showed his weasel face beside the respectable author of his days.

"May I come in?" he squeaked.

XIII.

"ESTIMABLE Bourignard, you bring your scion up very badly," said Valnoir, somewhat vexed by this interruption; "who allowed him to come and disturb us?"

The doorkeeper's gold spectacles trembled on his august nose, but he found no reply, divided as he was between the humiliation of deserving this reproach and the anger caused him by Agricola's fresh caper.

"Come, come in, you spiteful toad," snarled Taupier.

The urchin did not wait to be twice spoken to, but glided in at the

partially opened door to the middle of the room, with his sharp nose in the air. Nothing was changed in his bearing or apparel. He still wore the jack tar's complete suit his father had bought him, ready made, in the early days of the siege, but the glazed hat was without a crown, the anchor buttons had been cut off—perhaps lost in the noble game of pitch-and-toss—and the trousers were in ribbons. His once cunning and mocking countenance had gradually expanded into insolence. He scanned the party with a confident air and finally settled his glance upon the charms of the fair Rose, and never even deigned to honour his venerable father with a squint.

"What do you want?" challenged Valnoir.

"To tell you a story," said the boy without wincing.

"Are you larking with us, you wicked cub?" screamed the furious hump-back.

"Look here, I am not speaking to you," replied Agricola.

Taupier sprang up to punish this impudence with his own hands, but the youth, not a whit intimidated by the grotesque build of his adversary, fell immediately on guard, his feet apart, his knees bent, and his hands open. Young Bourignard had evidently been studying the art of Parisian boxing with foot and hand, vulgarly termed *la savate*, and was afraid of nobody at it. The incident became ridiculous, and Madame de Charmière, having more serious matters in her head, hastened to impose order.

"Let the child explain, my dear Taupier," she said in the authoritative voice she knew how to assume on occasion. "He may give us some useful information."

"On what? on the market-price of balls and tops."

"I know more about 'em than you do!" said the lad, mockingly. "And I know what a full-size Punch sells for."

"My little friend," sweetly, said the lovely Rose, foreseeing with her feminine cunning some important revelation, "what have you to tell us?"

"Things worth more to you than me."

"Tell us quick, then, for these gentlemen and I are talking business."

"I am willing to tell, but not for nothing."

"Oh, I say, virtuous Bourignard, this is a promising youth, this heir presumptive of yours!" exclaimed Valnoir.

"Indeed?" queried Rose, smiling, "then it must be interesting?"

"What'll you give us to know 'zactly what went on t'other night in the Rue de Laval?" demanded the little rogue with perfect equanimity.

This question had the immediate effect of changing every countenance. Valnoir turned pale, Taupier frowned and grinned horribly, and Bourignard raised his arms heavenwards to express the admiration with which his son's talent filled him. Madame de Charmière was the only one who preserved enough freedom of mind to continue the questioning.

"Were you there, my little chap?" she asked in a tone of quite maternal interest.

"I will answer when you show you mean business by cashing up," said Agricola, without being ensnared.

"There's a good many cakes to be bought with a napoleon," insinuated Rose, drawing out an elegant portemonnaie.

"Cakes? no, you don't. Since the siege, they make 'em of horse-fat."

"Well, sugar-plums, then."

"I've grown out of them. I tell you how I stand; I owe seven francs, six sous lost at pitch-and-toss to Alfred Cramouzot, nineteen shinners at the

'boozing-ken' on the Chauseé Clignancourt—and I must have a little to go on the spree with. Look here—I'll let it all out for two yellow boys."

"There you are, my little friend," replied the lady, who never hesitated in great extremities.

Agricola clutched the coins shining between Rose's gloved fingers and slipped them into his shoes; after this novel mode of depositing money in his bank, he rose and took an oratorical pose.

"Do you know," he began, "who knocked the lid off the head of the gentleman in spec's—old Frapillon?"

"You have been paid to tell us," sharply said Taupier, who bore the speaker a grudge.

"That's quite right of you. Well, it was that walking beer-barrel, Pilevert."

"Antoine! impossible!" ejaculated Madame de Charmière, very agitated at the prospect of being summoned as a witness before the Assizes which would try her brother.

"Well, I believe it very likely," hissed the humpback.

Valnoir had sunk down into an arm-chair, a prey to acute and varied emotions.

"Here comes the story you ordered," proceeded the boy. "I'm obliged to tell you that Sunday last made four days that I had been from home without seeing the respectable phiz of my papa—"

"Agricola, you abuse my kindness," remonstrated Bourignard, "and the liberty accorded to sons on reaching manhood does not authorize minors to—"

"Silence there, noble father!" shouted Taupier.

"I was loafing in the Rue Montorgueil about six o'clock," continued the juvenile narrator, "when I spied Pilevert cutting the paper for the day and marching off arm-in-arm with Father Frapillon towards the Markets. It looked rum to me that a swell in blinkers would travel so awfully fast with a bloated chap whom the police was likely to have an eye on, and so I set to following them just to find out what game they were hatching together."

"There's some sense in the toad after all," said Taupier.

"So I cracked on the pace, and saw them go into Baratte's eating house. Ho! ho! says I, the gent in the gold barnacles wants to treat Pilevert, and he doesn't do it only for the pleasure of paying."

"Ingenious youth!" uttered Bourignard.

"So I stuck myself there, but, really, I never believed they would have so long a blow-out as that; their tuck-in lasted four hours, and if I had not met Alfred who stood me five 'goes' in the bar below, I should ha' been starved out. However, out they come, Pilevert so tight—tight as a drum—"

"Cut it short—you're making it too long," said Taupier.

"Oh! I'll cut it short enough," answered Agricola, offended. "They went to the club on the Boulevard de Clichy, and next into the cellar in the alley alongside, to your meeting, which they left a good deal quicker than they meant to do."

"By thunder!" squeaked the humpback, "I'll wager, you tricky monkey, that it was you who imitated the policeman's voice on the stairs."

"You'd wager on a certainty, old boy!" replied the youth impudently. "I'm as good at imitations as any actor going."

"Agricola, your jesting passes all bounds," rebuked the porter, who had not yet got over his fright.

"Attention! the curtain rises on the last act. On leaving the cellar, I saw 'em going easy towards the Rue de Laval. I would have bet forty sous

against a cherry-brandy that they were off to the pavilion there. I should have won the bet, I tell you. They slipped along the walls and popped in at the little door there, like a letter slips into a pillar-box."

"It was open for them, eh?" queried Rose.

"No—old Frapillon juggled with the spring catch. I saw it all from the street corner and I had a rare laugh when I saw 'em in the trap. What a lark I had! for an hour I whistled, knocked 'em up, and no end of a game! But it was no fun kicking up my heels in the street, but all at once it became a bigger joke than ever."

"Get on, get on!" said the impatient Taupier.

"I was kicking my toes against a big stone when I saw a man and a woman stop before the door and open it without any trouble. I went up, and what do I hear? a row! a regular quarrel and—bang! a pistol went off!"

"But who told you that Pilevert fired it, you fool!" cried the hump-back.

"Wait, wait, you are too much in a hurry. So I struck up a bit of a song to frighten 'em and crawled up on my hands and knees and waited. In about twenty minutes, I saw the door softly open and our Pilevert came out with 'old Frappy' on his back, and he laid him down to sleep in the middle of the road. I don't know whether it was his feelings or the liquor that'd overcome him, but he could hardly keep on his legs in going back; and then he found out that he had forgotten the revolver and he went and put it beside the stiff 'un."

"What next?" faltered Madame de Charmière.

"Next, the door opened, in a quarter of an hour—more or less, and there come out four of 'em that time and they walked off towards the Avenue Trudaine."

"Two were women, no doubt?" said Valnoir, inquiringly.

"No, only one, the one who went in, there was the fellow who brought her, and Pilevert, and another man, a guy in a large cowl and a long coat."

"And did you not follow them, stupid?" asked Taupier.

"I should 'a liked to see you follow 'em, animated corkscrew that you are," returned the boy insolently. "Catch me running after four men—two of 'em no light weights, just to be killed like the old chap in the barnacles. Saying nothing of having to pass his cold meat, and never liking to see dead 'uns. Let them admire 'em as likes 'em—not me!"

Agricola spun round on one foot and held his peace, fully persuaded that he had earned his money.

"Don't you know anything more?" queried Taupier abruptly after a silence.

"Nothing, nicht," replied the youth to show his proficiency in languages.

"Why didn't you come sooner to tell us?"

"Because the patrol picked me up as I were a-coming round home by the Rue Breda, and they clapped me into the cells, and when I was let go, I went out Bondy way to hunt for potatoes in the fields."

"Hark! I think I hear the bell below. I must attend to my duty," said Bourignard, much affected by his son's narrative.

The latter followed him out, calling:

"It's all right, I've got my money! And now I'm off on the booze."

XIV.

AFTER Bourignard and his hopeful son had effected their exit, a momentary silence ensued. Agricola's revelation had thrown the trio into perplexity and all were deep in reverie, till Taupier shook it off the first. He never liked dwelling for long under any painful impression, and what is more, he pretended to be a man of resources in tribulation. So he deemed it meet to offer a piece of consolatory advice, saying with a snap of the fingers :

" Pooh ! what I see clearest in all this story is that we now have our grip on all these people."

" How so ? " inquired Valnoir, appearing much less serene.

" Why, it strikes me that they have a nice little murder to answer for. If they try to worry us, I fancy we sha'n't need to reply to them."

" No, it is not so clear to me," muttered the editor. " I see that Pilevert has killed Frapillon, but how and why ? I cannot make that out."

" Besides," took up Madame de Charmière, " Antoine—I mean Pilevert has never been savage, that I know of, and I am greatly astonished that he should have killed anyone."

" Why, who else could it be ? You have heard what that imp said ? "

" He did not see what happened over^{the} the wall, and the pistol may have been fired by one of those who came out with Pilevert afterwards."

" By him or another of the band, it's all the same, and we hold them all by that crime of theirs."

" Gentlemen," broke in Rose, " we are again going astray in useless discussion. What it is important for us to learn, is where Frapillon put the money. Do not let us forget that point—"

" Capital ! you have it," said Taupier, " but I do not despair of finding it at Molinchard's, although our late treasurer was cunning enough to tell lie about putting it in the bank."

" What kind of a man is this Molinchard ? " asked Rose, who had turned thoughtful again.

" Oh, a trumpery quack whom Frapillon made his familiar demon, and who would sell his father's bones to get a penny."

" Doesn't he keep a private asylum ? I seem to remember an advertisement of his in one of our late issues ? " said Valnoir.

" The same. It was Frapillon who found the money to start the enterprise and he took the profits. It's at the top of Montmartre, and Molinchard has the cheek to style it the Villa des Buttes."

" You must run up that way and dexterously pump the fellow."

" Just what I was thinking of," said Taupier ; " I have a fine excuse for getting in."

" What is it ? "

" Why, Hector Podensac got a bullet in the arm the other day and he has gone to lie up at Molinchard's ambulance. A droll idea ; but I shall profit by it to step that way some day."

" Tell me, my dear," inquired Rose of Valnoir, " do you see anything against our paying a visit to the wounded hero ? "

" Not at all, but I do not see the utility of doing so."

" A woman sees many things that a man wouldn't. And I am sure that after I have chattered away for an hour there with the people, I shall know how to act."

"Not a bad notion," remarked Taupier.

"Still I do not exactly know how Podensac will take the thing," said Valnoir, not showing much enthusiasm for the idea of his beloved; "I know little of him, and I am even somewhat at odds with him since he acted as Saint-Senier's second."

"Oh, if that's all, I'll undertake to bring you together," said the hump-back, "and I will even profit by the occasion to ask him some particulars on his return to town after the duel. I have never clearly heard what happened between him, Pilevert, the officer, the rope dancer and the dead man, whom they brought back in the showman's carriage."

"Talking of the officer and that girl," observed the editor, "may it not be they whom Frapillon came across in the garden of the pavilion? That boy spoke of such a pair walking in there as if the place belonged to them, and it seems to me—"

"My own idea," interrupted Taupier; "all the more as at the club a moony old 'rampart snail' came to announce the arrival of a messenger from the Army of the Loire, who had brought a French prisoner and a woman. But what likelihood is there that the Prussians would have let them go?"

"Anything may happen," said Valnoir thoughtfully.

"Then again, there was a third person at the chalet that night, the one that little rogue saw come out in a hooded topcoat—I don't suppose he comes from Prussia, eh?"

"But what has become of the two ladies of the pavilion?" inquired Rose.

"Oh, they were no longer there by that time," answered the hump-back. "I know the secretary of the police commissary who made the search of the pavilion; he's a pure patriot who reads the 'Serpenteau' daily, and he gives me many an item for the police column and jottings about town. He told me that they had cut away in a cab after a kind of riot that was got up. People babble of bacon lights in the neighbourhood, and said they would break in. So the ladies took fright and went away."

"Doesn't anyone know where?"

"No; but it can be found out."

"This is all very odd. Did not your friend tell you what they found during the search?"

"He did, but it gives no clue. On the ground floor were some women's garments and linen, and household appurtenances that the ladies had no time to remove with them, which proves they were in hot haste to disappear."

"Is that all?"

"About all. In an upper floor room, they found a number of medicine bottles and the like, as if a sick patient had been looked after, some men's clothes and nothing more."

"No papers? no written information?"

"Three or four insignificant letters written before the siege. Saint-Senier's commission as an officer, and an official communication from the War Ministry announcing that the accused lieutenant was a prisoner at Saint-Germain."

"It's incredible! where could they all have gone to? People do not disappear over night like this, above all in a besieged city from which there is no getting out."

"This party came to find the two ladies, that's clear."

"Gentlemen," said Madaine de Charmière, always judicious and practical, "I believe it is quite superfluous to dwell on these details. If our enemies hide themselves, so much the better! it is because they have grounds for doing so, and so they will not be searching about to devour us. It will be ample time to act against them when they show themselves; but their coming in with Pilevert looks unexplicable to me. It's he that I want to find, and that I will—or, rather, he will come to me of his own accord."

"Now, that is likely," assented the humpback.

"Then," went on the intelligent Rose, "I promise you that I shall not let him go until I learn all that we need to know."

"I daresay you are right, my darling," said Valnoir.

"Without reckoning that this does not prevent your going to sound Molinchard," added Taupier.

"Come, will you let me manage this matter entirely?" demanded the adventuress, who seemed to have carefully reflected whilst the gentlemen were speaking.

"Another good notion," squeaked the humpback, "and I am quite ready to enrol myself under your orders."

"So am I," said Valnoir.

"Then that's settled. My dear Charles, I'll begin operations to-morrow."

"Do you remember, lovely lady," inquired Taupier, "how we held such another meeting as this in the late Frapillon's office in the Rue Cadet, and how we vowed on that day also to begin a campaign against the Saint-Seniers?"

"And I do not see that it has any too well succeeded," observed Valnoir.

"That's because it was badly conducted," said Rose with a smile. "But it is I who am the general now, and you will see that we shall vanquish this time."

"So be it," said the humpback, taking up his hat. "I'll just run round and see how the paper is going off on the boulevards."

"Keep well till to-morrow," said Valnoir, giving him his hand.

"Till to-morrow," repeated Taupier, wriggling forth after having kissed the tips of Rose's fingers, who submitted without too much repugnance.

She had her plan, and depended a good deal on the humpback to help her through.

XV.

ON the ground floor of his asylum, in a dark, damp hole decorated with the appellation of "Manager's Office," Dr Molinchard sat before a cylinder writing desk, turning over his books. His colourless face wore an expression of concealed satisfaction not habitual to him at the time when Frapillon, his opulent capitalist, reigned and governed in the Villa des Buttes. This arose from the agent's violent, unforeseen death having brought about great changes in the existence of the radical doctor. For the first time in his life, Molinchard found himself free in action and absolute master of an establishment of which he had previously only been the very humble manager. Nobody exactly knew the conditions of his partnership with the deceased, inasmuch as the latter liked to deal personally, and without letting anybody into his confidence, with the underhand schemes he was

continually working up. He needed no notary public for his deeds, which he was good enough lawyer to draw up himself, and when he installed his liege man at Montmartre, their reciprocal interests had been protected by a very simply worded agreement. As soon as he heard by public rumour of the tragedy in the Rue de Laval, Molinchard had hurried to the Rue Cadet. When he presented himself, the officials were sealing up the rooms, and he learned from the afflicted clerk that the agent's property would remain untouched for the time being. Nobody knew of his having relatives of any degree, at least, in Paris; and it would be necessary to wait for the end of the siege before anyone in the country could be notified. So the doctor was sure for a more or less long interval not to be called to account by his partner's problematical heirs, and the prospect was far from displeasing him. Hence he took care not to go about much after the mysterious death, but remained quiet in his Montmartre asylum, abstaining from any public action, and even urging prudence so far as not to attend Frapillon's funeral. In this he had to do violence to his democratic creed, for the civil burial of the business-agent served as pretext to a grand demonstration of his "friends and brothers." But the wary Molinchard knew that the "Serpenteau" conducted the ceremony, and he did not care to excite any awkward questions by his presence. Despite a community of opinions, the interests of the newspaper were not his, and he even deeply repented having let too much ooze out in a recent chat with Taupier. He had said enough for the wily humpback to suspect the deposit made by Frapillon a few days before his tragic fate. However the doctor sincerely hoped that his speech had fallen into careless ears, and he had, besides, always the final resource of denying. This was not the only secret that his former master had bequeathed him. Since chance had mixed him up with the abduction of the ladies from the pavilion, Molinchard had them on his mind. On the night following the removal of the two ladies to the Villa des Buttes, the infernal plotter had had time to explain part of his plan to his vile confederate. He had spoken to him of an enormous fortune to be obtained by hiding away an almost dying old noblewoman and a young lady attacked by lunaey. For the moment, Molinchard has asked nothing further. He never discussed the orders given him by his Cæsar, and, besides, the latter had promised to initiate him in the future more fully into the intricate affair. The servile doctor was therefore ready for anything ordered of him. Attracted out of her room on a perfidious pretext, Madame de Muire had been relegated to a carefully closed up chamber situated in a garret at the other end of the building. And her removal during Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier's sleep had left the latter exposed without defence to her persecutor's aims. But Frapillon had contented himself with stealing the keys of the pavilion, and the effects of the narcotic had not had any injurious result on the girl's health.

Matters had gone thus far when Molinchard learnt that the corpse of the organiser of all these shameful plots had been found in the street. He had been waiting till that very day for further instructions from him, and the news of his death flung him into the greatest perplexity. It is but fair to the doctor, to say that his first impulse was to set the poor ladies at liberty. But then he was of the opinion of Prince Talleyrand that the natural movements of the soul are to be distrusted, and he fell to musing on the consequences of such a course. Ill-informed upon the deceptive removal, which Frapillon had taken care to present in his own manner, and ignorant of the true antecedents of his prisoners and still more of their

characters and wordly position, Molinchard thought the first use they would make of their freedom would be to denounce him. Little as he had lent himself to the proceedings of the cashier, he might easily be considered his accomplice, and the fear of having to account to justice deterred him. Therefore the early days of the captivity of the ladies of the Saint-Senier family passed by in hesitation for their gaoler and in indescribable anguish for them.

The Countess de Muire had been again seized with a nervous attack and kept her bed, where she lamented and called for her niece. The doctor had confided her to the rough cares of the virago who was nurse at the Villa des Buttes, and he merely prescribed anodynes. Renée de Saint-Senier had many times received his visits, though overwhelmed with sorrow and a prey to sore disquiet. In these interviews, the astute Molinchard had shown studied reserve, speaking little, replying less, and listening with attention well concealed by an absent air to the girl's complaints and recriminations. To all the questions, and the fierce reproaches she heaped upon him, he opposed evasive sentences through which appeared a kind of affectionate pity. Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier had promptly had to conclude that this discreet doctor considered, or pretended to consider, her as mad, and this had thrown her into the deepest despair. As for the medical adviser, he had learnt enough to be certain that he held in his power members of the better class, victims of a scheme of which he but partly knew the object. Once fixed on this point, he thought to himself that he might make the most by siding with his enforced-patients. He had only to feign having been deceived as to their condition, and open the doors to them, laying all the blame of the arbitrary confinement upon the shoulders of J. B. Frapillon, who would not be present to deny it. Thus would he march out of a difficult and dangerous situation and at the same time assure himself of the gratitude of highly placed personages—an advantage which the doctor did not disdain, however radical he was. It is even probable that he would have abided by this wise resolution if an most unexpected phenomenon had not been developed in his tender heart : Molinchard fell in love with Renée. In vain did he fight against it and appeal to his governing principles as a free spirit and philosopher, he had yielded despite himself to the aristocratic witchery of Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier. His youthful conquests had never lain beyond the circle of the female customers of the taverns of the Latin quarter or the hospital laundress's assistants. He therefore fell a willing prey to a passion inspired by a beauty who appeared to come down from the uppermost altitudes of a world tabooed to quacks of his species. The unfortunate swain could no longer dissimulate that he was smitten, but he dared not tell his love. For Molinchard knew that nature had inflicted an unwinning countenance upon him and that his awkward manners would not prompt a fair and noble young woman to look favourably upon the declaration of his flame. Yet he could not make up his mind to part with his prisoner, and he began to rely on a new revolution to furnish him with the means of being accepted as a deliverer.

The memory of some proconsuls of 1793 who had forced lofty damsels to choose between the scaffold and their love, haunted Molinchard and gave him some hope. Nevertheless three weeks went by after Frapillon's death had made him governor of the Villa des Buttes and he was still no more advanced. The siege was plainly coming to an end by reason of the exhaustion of provisions, and still the doctor saw no solution to the enigma of his love and interest. So he grew very mopish, and on the day referred to

he was going sadly over the bills for the first half of January, when the fat woman who waited upon the female patients burst into his study with the impetuosity of a typhoon.

XVI.

"SIR," screamed the harpy, quite out of breath, "here are some people asking after you."

"Very well, mother Ponisse, very well," said Molinchard, "there's no necessity of your shouting the house down."

"I can't help speaking up, that comes natural," rejoined the harridan, still louder.

"What do they want?" said the doctor, vexed at being disturbed.

"They forgot to tell me; but you may put yourself out for the likes of them, they look of the tip-top sort I can tell you. One wears a topcoat with a rabbitskin collar so that he seems like an English lord, and they have brought a princess with them in a hat all feathers, and a Cashmere shawl."

"A lady?" queried Molinchard, beginning to be puzzled and even a little startled.

Very little frightens the man whose conscience is not clear, and Molinchard already dreaded the arrival of some anxious relative of the Saint-Senier couple.

"A lady for sure, and a 'swell' lady, too," replied the ex-daughter of the regiment; "to say nothing of their not having come afoot but in a cab which is waiting for them on the hill, below the watering-trough."

"I don't understand this," muttered the doctor; "unless these people are bringing me a fresh patient and—"

"Don't you frighten yourself," screamed mother Ponisse, "a shed like yours is good enough for the starvelings you keep overhead. By the way, do you know that little woman won't eat anything now?"

"Enough!" said Molinchard, authoritatively, "I will attend to that presently. Go and show in the persons who want me."

The hag went away grumbling, but she did not have the trouble to execute her order, for the office door opened and the callers appeared.

The first to show his grotesque figure was none other than Taupier, preceding his friend Valnoir, on whose arm came Madame de Charmière.

"My stars and crosses!" ejaculated the humpback, in his rarely choice language, "it looks as if you were doing well here since you keep people kicking their heels at your door."

On perceiving the terrible gnome, Molinchard turned pale, and hastened to close his desk. At all events, Taupier had inspired some fear, but since he had imprudently let out about the pocketbook on trust, Molinchard feared him like a gorgon. The haste with which he had covered in his papers had not escaped the keen-sighted humpback.

"We keep things in order, I see," he said, railingly, "drawers and papers docketted! splendid! it puts me in mind of the late J. B. F."

"But I assure you that I—I was only checking my tradesmen's bills and—"

"None of your assurance, illustrious Esculapius, but let me present my friends."

Molinchard, who had risen, though shaking with emotion, bowed so awkwardly that Rose had difficulty in repressing a hearty peal of laughter.

"You behold, under this flowery patterned dressing-gown," resumed Taupier, pitilessly, "a prince of science retired to the heights of Montmartre in order to devote himself to the relief of suffering humanity. His talents are known and his name—"

"Monsieur," interposed Valnoir, taking pity on the poor embarrassed doctor, "you must overlook the freaks of our friend, and let me introduce myself. I am the editor of the '*Serpenteau*,' of whom you no doubt have heard."

"Through poor Frapillon, certainly," stammered Molinchard, "and I am delighted—"

"You are forgetting Madame de Charmière," squeaked the humpback; "now own, my dear doctor, that you never saw so handsome a woman. This is the *Ægeria* of Valnoir, the angel of the '*Serpenteau*,' and—"

The fair Rose stopped the flow of mellifluous compliments by her own words.

"I was curious to admire the magnificent view to be obtained from your house," she said, with the most winsome of her smiles, "and I hope that you will not be vexed at me for having accompanied Monsieur Valnoir."

"The idea, madame, quite the contrary," protested the prince of medical science, becoming more stupid than ever.

"Besides, a woman is never out of place in a visit to a wounded man," added Madame de Charmière.

"A—a wounded man?" repeated Molinchard, trying to understand.

"Why, yes, you grand practitioner," said the humpback, "a wounded hero, who had the fancy, which I have qualified as droll, to come for advice and care to your ambulance."

"Which one? I have several under my charge," muttered the doctor, slightly boasting, for he really had no military patients save some cowardly national guardsmen, who had artfully got upon the sick list.

"Why, Podensac, of course! the celebrated leader of the daredevils of the Rue Maubuée."

"The captain? oh, have you come after him?" queried Molinchard, undeniably relieved.

"Why, whom else would you have us after, amiable Galen?"

"Well, I never thought of him, which is natural enough. Oh, he's getting on finely; a mere scratch; the projectile glided over the great trochanter and barely grazed the deltoid muscle—"

"Enough of that," interrupted Taupier; "you shall not bore us with your surgical terms. Rather take us to see Podensac."

"Only too willingly. Is he in his room?" Molinchard inquired of the ex-cantineer, who had remained in call.

"No, he's smoking a short pipe in the large yard," was the reply.

"Then, gentlemen, I will take you there," said the doctor, only too glad to get them out of the cabinet where he kept his secrets. "And if the lady does not object to tobacco smoke—"

"Not the least in the world," said Rose, much amused by the ridiculous fellow's airs and graces, "besides, in the open air, it will hardly annoy—"

"Get on, show the way," said the rude Taupier.

Molinchard did not want the words repeated, but conducted his guests through a long corridor, at the end of which a railing defended the entrance of what the fat servant styled the large yard.

"I see the captain, seated yonder," said the doctor, opening the barred door.

The visitors then stepped into a good-sized, walled-in yard, strewn with sand, and planted with three or four meagre acacias. It much more resembled a prison exercise yard than anything else. Against one of the walls, a group of invalid national guards, in their guernseys, were ardently playing "pitch and slap out," for five months the favourite game of the besieged. In the opposite corner, sitting on a bench and having one arm in a sling, Podensac was puffing his pipe, condemned by his rank to a dignified isolation. He rose on perceiving Taupier, and came towards the brilliant company, arriving so unexpectedly. He had been on pleasant terms with Valnoir before the duel at Saint-Germain, and bore him no grudge. As for the lovely Madame de Charmière, he knew her by sight. Hence the presentations were limited to cordial hand-shakings. Rose excused herself prettily for the intrusion, as she had already done to Molinchard, and again reaped flowers of complimentary speech in return, as the free lance leader professed refined gallantry towards the fair sex, and, moreover, was not sorry to parade himself before a dashing woman in the interesting character of a wounded warrior.

"Well, old friend, so you caught it hot from those rascally Prussians?" queried the humpback.

"Nothing to mention—a mere scratch, and I hope to be in the front soon again."

"Meanwhile, you are convalescing at friend Molinchard's. As soon as we learned you were here, we made up a party to come and see you."

"I am very grateful, particularly to the lady, for having taken the trouble to climb up here, for it's quite an Alpine ascent."

"It has not cost me much, monsieur," Rose said, sweetly; "I would go much farther to see a brave officer and a friend of Monsieur Valnoir's."

Podensac, deeply flattered by the compliment, put out his pipe and asked the visitors to share his bench, where Molinchard thought he might leave the group to its friendly effusions, and profit by the chance to slip away. He did not care to keep far from the house where he had many things to look after and he saw no gain to him in listening to his companions' conversation.

"I say, old fellow," said the humpback as soon as the doctor turned his heels, "it's a deuced long while since we saw each other."

"Faith, it is; it is a good three months since we met at Rueil in Mouchabeuf's tavern."

Taupier slightly started for the reminder was not agreeable.

"Apropos of that, I have a merry tale to tell you," went on the commander.

"Really?" said the other, at once thinking of Régine.

"Yes. Just to imagine—"

But Podensac was interrupted by the fall of a stone beside him, a stone which had nearly hit Madame de Charmière.

"You're not hurt, I hope, madame?" asked he.

"Halloo! there's a paper tied to the pebble," exclaimed Taupier, picking up the projectile.

XVII.

"THIS is singular!" said Valnoir.

"Let's see what the paper says," added the humpback.

"Stay," objected Rose, eyeing Podensac with a smile, "the letters that fly over walls are generally billets-doux—and I think you very impolite."

"Pooh?" said the officer of irregulars, "I have no such correspondence."

"Then we can read it, eh?" asked Taupier.

"Rather—all the more freely as I know what it's about."

The humpback unwound the paper which was secured to the stone by some coarse thread.

"Some joke of a street Arab lurking outside," muttered Valnoir.

Taupier found the note to be written on a whitey brown sugar paper.

"The dence, it's not easy to decipher," he remarked; "anybody would think it was written with a nail dipped in soot."

Still he contrived to spell out laboriously: "'Whoever you may be, have pity on a woman—'"

"It's in the style of a melodrama," wittily remarked the editor of the "Serpenteau."

"'On a woman,'" continued Taupier, "'drawn by a shameful trick into this house and kept by force—' Whew! this is getting serious. 'I entreat the reader of this to take it to a magistrate and tell him that a wicked forcible detention is being carried on here!'"

"Do finish," said Madame de Charmière, deeply attentive.

"Why, that's all," replied the reader.

"What, no signature?"

"Not the appearance of one, but there was not any room."

"Strange! let's see the writing."

"Oh, that will tell you nothing," said Taupier, holding out the paper. "It is dabbed on anyhow, but the spelling is first-class."

"Spelling good!" cried Valnoir, laughing. "Then this is a grave offence; does our doctor friend amuse himself by incarcerating princesses?"

"Who can say?" whispered Rose, become pensive. "He must be questioned—"

"I can't let you waste your time," interrupted Podensac; "princesses are scarce on the Butte Montmartre at any time, and since the siege, there's none at all. I guarantee to you that Molinchard does not immure any highnesses in his dungeons."

"From whom came the note, then?"

"From a poor crazy creature who is all the time at this game. She has shelled me three or four times already with papers tied to pebbles, thrown over from the yard where she strolls."

"What did you do with them?" inquired Madame de Charmière, eagerly.

"Showed them to the doctor, who told me the story of the unfortunate woman."

"What story is it?"

"Like that of all young girls going mad. This one is a grocer's or a joiner's daughter—I do not remember which now—who was going to be married when the war broke out. Her betrothed was called out in the reserve and there never came any news about him since Sedan. Then her wits went astray and her father put her here. You see it is a tragedy of love according to all the rules."

"Where next will passion lodge itself?" sneered Valnoir, who, as a democrat, thought he was bound to treat common folk loftily.

"It is truly touching," said Madame de Charmière in a convinced way. "To think that this poor woman is alone here, cast off by all her kith and kin!"

"The father is a *sot*, from what the doctor tells me, and only too happy to be rid of her."

"Have you no curiosity to see her?"

"Faith, no! more especially as it appears that she becomes raving *mad* at the sight of a strange face. Her mania is to believe herself persecuted by persons who wish to take her away from her beloved, and the sight of a man, in particular, sends her off into dreadful fits."

"Is she young?" inquired Rose, after a pause.

"I believe so, but not a bit pretty, by what Molinchard assures me."

"This explains why you did not press to pay her a visit," sneered Taupier, "for we know you to be a great lady-killer."

"Not so much of a one as you, old fellow," said Podensac, modestly; "and I might ask you news of one of your conquests whom you must have seen again lately."

"What are you talking about?" asked the humpback, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, I warrant you can play the cunning, for you are sure your beauty will not blab—"

"Gentlemen," interposed Madame de Charmière, but feebly interested in Taupier's flirtations, "I do not wish to be in the way of your confidences and so I shall ask Charles to take me to the doctor to beg leave to visit this poor recluse; he will not refuse a woman."

But if Rose had only understood the allusion hidden in the rifleman's retort to Taupier, she would certainly not have thought of leaving the place. But she failed to catch the meaning, her head being full of this pretended case of love-madness. Her feminine instinct made her see a valuable mystery in this vulgar tale, and though she did not quite know what the links were connecting it with the affairs of the "*Serpenteau*," she wished to be clear upon the point. Valnoir, similarly urged by a vague curiosity, asked nothing better than to replace the desperado's conversation by a saunter under the arcades of the Villa des Buttes. He wanted no entreaty to accompany his lady-love.

"We shall soon be seeing you again, gentlemen," said Rose, with a gracious smile specially destined for the gallant Gascon.

"If you stay away long, we shall come after you," squeaked Taupier after the couple making for the grated door.

The usually penetrative humpback had not understood any better what amours the soldier spoke of, his mind being elsewhere, and when he was alone with him, he only thought of extracting the information he needed.

"The siege is dragging on, eh, old friend," he said with a familiar clap on his shoulder.

"Yes, it is, but you do not look any the worse and it strikes me that it agrees with you."

"Well, so, so," muttered Taupier, with a satisfied air; "with such a circulation as our paper boasts, we can afford to have mustard with our beef."

"You're a lucky set! anybody would have thought that your duel at Saint-Germain must have brought bad luck."

"Ah! by the way," cried the humpback, catching the ball on the bound, "let's speak a bit of that duel, for I have never had the chance to do so with you since that famous day. Tell me what happened to you on the return journey in that bull-headed showman's vehicle."

"You joker!" said Podensac, "you know as well as I."

"No, I don't, on my word ! that mountebank is so dense that I could draw nothing clear from him."

"That's very likely as regards the mountebank, but—after all ! it is possible !" said the sharpshooter's commander, laughing suddenly, "there were reasons for the other to keep quiet."

Taupier again let the allusion pass without noticing it.

"Well, dear boy," continued the son of Mars, "we came pretty nigh being snapped up by the Uhlans, who followed us almost up to Rueil, where I parted company with my fellow travellers to go and join my lads of the Rue Maubuée."

"And the—the dead man ?" questioned the humpback with some hesitation, the memory being distasteful to him in spite of his cynicism.

"The dead man was still living when I left him under his cousin's charge."

"Oh !" cried Taupier, turning pale.

"But not much life in him ; I grant that the joltings of that confounded wildbeast cage shook him up a bit, but he had the death-rattle and he must have given up the ghost before entering Paris."

"Who can be sure ?" muttered the other.

"This reminds me that I forgot the other night to ask her about it."

"Her ? what her ?"

"Come, come, are we playing at charades or capping verses ? Do you imagine that I am the dupe of your guileless airs and have forgotten our meeting in Mouchabeuf's tavern ?"

"Mouchabeuf's tavern ? ye—es, well, what next ?" Taupier's voice shook, for he feared he comprehended only too well.

"The little dumb girl, of course. You dog, you ! Isn't she nice and weren't you glad to see her again ?"

"Seeing her again ?" repeated the abortion, writhing on the bench.

"Don't try the 'don't understand' on me. You know very well that she gave the slip to the Prussians who took her, and since she got back into town, she has had time to run into your arms."

Taupier rolled up his eyes, bewildered.

"Between ourselves, you owe me a good breakfast—which you can stand after the siege—for I have had a hand in restoring you your Dulcinea. But you don't look overjoyed."

"Speak, why don't you speak !" screamed the humpback. "When did you see her again ?"

"Oh, you're getting to be a nuisance with your pretended innocence. When she came to Bezons bridge with a messenger from the Army of the Loire, and an officer of your own acquaintance."

"Who ?"

"Saint-Senier's cousin, of course, the second in that duel. But now I come to think of it, maybe it's he that's cut you out and I can understand why you have not seen your flame."

He roared with laughter under the nose of Taupier, who was biting his nails.

"What did you do with them ? where are they ?" whined the unfortunate humpback.

"You're wanting to know more than I do, old fellow. I sent them all on to the Place Vendôme, and stayed at my post. If you want any information you had better apply to the Governor of Paris."

"It was they!" said Taupier in dismay, remembering all at once the national guard's report at the club and Agricola's tale.

Valnoir and his lady companion reappeared at the grating even as the humpback let this mournful outcry escape him.

XVIII.

DURING this critical morning, Molinchard had gone through many a pang of diverse nature. After the shock of Taupier unexpectedly bringing Valnoir and his beloved, a relative calm ensued as the visit seemed to be naturally enough explained by a desire to cheer up his boarder Podensac. The opening of the conversation in the yard before him evinced nothing alarming, and he thought himself clever in slipping away. Thus he believed he had shown a clear conscience. However, this was not the principal motive impelling him back to his office. He was much in the situation of that hero of Edgar Allan Poe's romance where the wife's murderer hides the dead body under the bedroom flooring and dares not go away from the accusatory remains. Molinchard kept no corpses, but his terrors were no less acute. His two prisoners weighed on him like remorse, and his mad love for Renée added still further to his torment. He had come to the point of not daring to leave the house lest something would occur in his absence, although his precautions were well taken.

Madame de Muire, up in a garret, confined to her bed by cruel sufferings, was unable to stir, and nobody went up the stairs to her sick-room, except the fat nurse, whose thick skull was impervious to all the entreaties and promises the victim might address her. Mother Ponisse was furthermore bound by gratitude to the doctor, who had chanced to extiriate her from a very ugly scrape into which her innate brutality had led her. Before entering his service, she had kept a low drinking-dcen at the foot of the Buttes, where she had nearly beaten a customer to death one night in a pugilistic bout. Molinchard had taken eare of the wounded man without charge and saved the virago from the police. She had given up her shop to come to her defender's house, as he had perceived valuable parts in her, and tried to attach her to his cause. She was both guardsman and policeman, with eyes and fists all at the call of her master to whom she vowed a canine fidelity. He thus relied on his Cerberus repulsing all attempts at escape made by the two recluses, though he had not wished to humiliate Renée by her constant presence. Mother Ponisse never went into the detached house where Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier was imprisoned save for some indispensable household work, and she had orders not to answer the young lady's questions; she was not honoured with any, however. Molinehard had reserved to himself the privilege of eonversing with Renée, but he did not farc much better.

After momentarilly taking leave of his visitors, he gloomily sat down again at his desk, though he had recovered some confidence after the alarms he had been subjected to. Mother Ponissc had told him that all was quiet in her department and he was beginning to hope that he would soon be rid of his untimely visitors, when, to his huge surprise, Valnoir and Madame de Charmière entered the study.

"You will not be cross at our asking a favour, will you, sir?" said the latter, with her most coaxing smile.

"Not at all, madame," faltered Molinehard, but already galled.

"M. de Valnoir wanted to persuade me that I would be intrusive, but I took the risk upon myself—"

"You were quite right, and I am always delighted—"

"To be agreeable to me? I was sure of that."

"Be good enough to tell me, madame—"

"I must warn you that you would vex me dreadfully if you snubbed me."

"I haven't the least inclination to do that, unless it—it is impossible."

The more Molinichard spoke, the more he became entangled in his phrases.

"Be careful, doctor," said the lady, assuming a wicked mien which replied disconcerting her victim, "you are making me a rather Jesuitical reply."

"Still, I cannot pledge myself without knowing what you want."

"Let me tell you that in the lexicon of woman there is no such word as impossibility, and I shall not allow the excuse."

"Please then to tell me, madame—"

"In short, I want to go through your asylum and speak with the inmates."

The doctor started and turned pale at the same time, with scarcely the strength to gasp:

"That is impossible!"

"Mind, sir," said Rose, softly shaking her finger at him; "I catch you up at the first word. A blunt refusal and as poor reason—I expected better from you."

"But I protest, madame, that the sight would afford nothing interesting. I only keep poor commonplace people, often afflicted with repulsive infirmities, and such things—"

"A familiar sight, sir," replied Madame de Charmière, trying to look dignified; "for I myself started an ambulance a month ago."

"You can't help it, doctor," observed her cavalier. "You know a woman clings to her whims."

After his first fright, Molinichard wondered whether the wish to visit the asylum was a mere whim or a bit of significant spite. He began to think it best to give way to the freak and conduct her to the ordinary wards.

"Good gracious, madame," he said with a little more coolness, "if you are so bent on it, and you have the courage to bear the disgust of walking by the hospital beds, I am ready to conduct you."

"Now, that's the way to talk!" Rose gaily exclaimed; "I knew you were obliging. Well, are you ready?" she went on, fidgetting like a child eager to go and play.

"I warn you that you will have to go up and down stairs and do some walking," proceeded the doctor, quite at ease now.

"And I warn you that I mean to see everything. To commence with, please show me the mad woman."

This word fell on Molinichard like the blow of a mallet, and he drew back in terror.

"The m—m—mad woman?" he repeated in bewilderment.

"Yes, indeed! that young woman who lost her betrothed. I doat on love stories and you will see that I particularly want to condole with the victim of a deep and sincere affection—it is so rare!"

The hapless doctor literally did not know where he was; forgetting in his trouble the romance he had palmed upon Podensac. All that he clearly felt was that this concerned Renée, and his first impulse was to impudently deny everything.

"I assure you, madame," he said unsteadily, "that we do not treat mental disorders here and that I have no idea to whom you are alluding."

"Oh, that's too strong!" exclaimed Rose, clapping her hands, "and your secrecy would make anybody imagine that you have fallen in love with your patient and aspire to replace her betrothed."

Without suspecting it, the speaker had shot home, and Molinchard all but fell over backward.

"It's not true!" he muttered, running his hand over his forehead; "there's no girl here."

"Would you like to see the contrary, under her own hand?" tranquilly inquired Rosc, holding out the paper scrawled upon by Renée.

She had kept it folded up in the hollow of her hand under her glove after Taupier had shown it to her in the yard, and drew it forth from that regular feminine storehouse. The unfortunate doctor took it, glanced at it and let his arms fall down in despair.

"Come, come, doctor, my dear doctor, my own little doctor," said the tease, mincingly; "now that you have no further need to keep close, take me to the poor thing. I am sure she is bewitching."

The imminence of the danger restored some steadiness to the badgered man.

"Well, madame," he said, trying to wear an air of wounded gravity, "since you insist so much upon it, I am obliged to answer you that this girl's father entrusted her to me and that I have professional reasons for not letting her be seen by anybody whomsoever. The mere sight of a stranger is enough to send her into terrible nervous spasms, and I should fail in all my duties were I to yield to a desire devoid of other motive than curiosity."

This laboriously constructed sentence produced no effect upon the hearer, who eyed him fixedly and said with an evil smile:

"Curiosity has its good side, doctor."

Molinchard was seeking a retort to this when Mother Ponisse, who seemed to be engaged to come in at critical junctures, opened the door a little and bellowed:

"Come quick! Number 8 is at the last kick!"

"Excuse me!" cried the doctor, rushing out of his office.

XIX.

THIS abrupt flight cut short Madame de Charmière's project and conversation. She deliberated a while whether to await the doctor's return or be content for the present with what she had learnt. Valnoir moved they should go. All these stories of the charnelhouse disgusted him and Molinchard bored him, and, as he suspected no other mystery in the asylum than the hiding-place of the defunct cashier's funds, he was willing to let Taupier discover it without him. Nor was Rose sorry to concert with the humpback, whose aptness for prying she knew. So the couple decided to join him in the yard, which they reached without meeting anybody. Mother Ponisse had doubtlessly accompanied the doctor to the patient requiring his cares, for she did not show her ugly face in the lobby generally haunted by her. As Valnoir and his companion opened the grated door, Taupier learnt of the return of Régine and Lieutenant de Saint-Senier from Podensac; this was terrible news, which threw disarray into his ideas and

upset all his plans at the same time. So he was thinking of nothing else than hastening home to prepare the means of parrying the events menacing the Red Band. The return of the Valnoir couple furnished him with an excellent pretext to take leave of the commander whose conversation interested him little since he had learnt all he wanted to know. As soon as Rose was within earshot, he whispered :

“Nice news I’ve got !”

“And I am on a track that will lead us far,” the lady replied in an undertone.

It not being a suitable place for exchanging the result of their investigations, the two agreed, by a glance, to abridge the call. In vain did Podensac display all his arts to detain his pretty visitor, he had to content himself with the permission, graciously granted, it is true, to call and thank her in person when he got well, at her rooms in the Place de la Madeleine. He saw his obliging friends to the grated door, where they parted with an interchange of compliments. One incident struck Madame de Charmière on leaving. The main gate was wide open, with no warder, which seemed to denote disorder in the household. Some unforeseen occurrence must have interfered with the habitual watchfulness, for this asylum was ordinarily guarded like a prison, and none came in or went out without the ex-cantinière’s inspection. But that vigilant dame had, for the moment, other cares than to stand sentry. Her absence was amply explained by the gravity of the news she brought her master in the midst of his conversation with the fair Madame de Charmière. Number 8, who was dying, not to use her rather expressive than stylish phrase, was no other than the unfortunate Countess de Muire. Molinhard had instantly known which patient was in question, and, half through eagerness to assist her, and half to elude Rose’s persistence, he had rushed out of his office without further thought of his visitors.

“My secretary is locked, and Valnoir is not the man to pick locks,” he said to himself as he climbed the stairs four at a time, followed by the virago, who “blew” like a grampus.

“What’s the matter with her?” he briefly demanded.

“A fit! She’s choking, and stiffening, and rolling her eyes, and shrieking for the other—the young one—”

With his long strides, Molinhard took no more than a minute to arrive on the upper floor. He hurriedly opened a door numbered “8,” and entered the room wherein the poor lady was confined.

On an iron bedstead, furnished with dimity curtains as in hospitals, Madame de Muire was extended. Her complexion was waxy white, and her thin body stood out in relief under the scanty coverings. Molinhard took but one bound from the door to the couch, and grasped her wrist to feel her pulse. At the same time he scrutinised the death-stricken countenance. He felt a few slow beats ere the circulation completely stopped. Then the eyes glazed, and the mouth opened convulsively to utter a name—that of Renée, and the voice died away in the throat. Molinhard let go the arm which fell lifeless on the bed.

“She is dead,” he murmured, as mother Ponisse lumbered in.

Her obesity had much delayed her upon the stairs, and she had great difficulty in getting out the cynical question :

“Well, how is the old girl?”

“All is over. Hold your tongue,” said the doctor.

“My word! it’s no loss,” grumbled the horrid hag, “she gave me more trouble than all the rest put together.”

Molinchard did not censure this abominable funeral oration, busy as he was in holding a little hand-mirror to the woman's lips, from which no breath came to tarnish the glass. After this test, he fell on a chair in dismay, whilst the ex-cantinière regarded him with amazement. She was not used to seeing him show so much emotion before death, and she considered it her duty to remind him of the necessities of the situation.

"I must go and inform the registrar of deaths, eh?" she inquired in the same tone she would ask if dinner was to be put on the table.

The doctor started as if abruptly awakened.

"I forbid it," said he, harshly.

"Pooh! what are you going to do with the poor creature, then? It's true she was a paying customer, but all's a right to a funeral. This is not a hospital, and you cannot mean to cut her up, can you?"

"Enough!" roared Molinchard, exasperated by the odious babbling. "I will go to the town-hall myself."

"All right! I am not so eager to go running all over Montmartre."

"Go down and tell those gentlemen and the lady that I am at a patient's side, and ask them to excuse me."

"I am going," replied the hag sulkily.

"And not a word about what has happened," quickly added the doctor.

"You needn't have gone to the trouble of saying that," grumbled mother Ponisse, "I know my business, don't I?"

She closed the door with a bang, and none of the gentleness usual in the chamber of death. Molinchard, on being left alone, became wrapt in his reflections which were not gay. Not that his sensitiveness was abnormally developed, the practise of his profession had hardened him long ago to death and its lugubrious surroundings, or that he felt a deep sorrow for the poor victim of his friend Frapillon's infamous schemes. But the death was an unforeseen event, which might have most awful consequences. Foremost, it forced him to let official evidence be published of the presence of the Countess de Muire in his asylum. A living person may be kept hidden, but not a dead one. The declaration of the demise would forcibly bring in the medical officer of the district, and Molinchard had all sorts of reasons to distrust his brother-physicians, who did not, for the most part, hold him in lofty esteem. Yet he was still less pestered by these official worries than by the effect the terrible news would have upon the other captive. He might hide it from her for a time, but the day would come when dissimulation would be no longer possible. With such mad plans as Molinchard cherished to win the young lady, this event became an additional embarrassment. How could he even hope his dreams would be realised when the remembrance of the dead countess would rise between him and Renée? On the other hand, how could he acquaint her that she had lost her second mother, without having even been allowed to receive her last kiss? The miserable doctor sitting at the foot of the bed revolved these sad reflections beside the icy, motionless body—his eyes at times meeting the others' stony gaze. Though far from naturally impressionable, Molinchard imagined his victim was watching him, and he felt the need of eluding the cold look which seemed to reproach him for his shameful behaviour. He rose and paced the chamber, but the moving about did not drive away his tormenting sensations.

"After all," he muttered over the poor released captive, "the girl is now alone in the world. Who can tell but that she will accept me just to protect her. I will tell her all."

With which resolution, he went out, taking care to double-lock the door and carry away the key.

XX.

EVER since a fatal rashness had thrown Renée de Saint-Senier in the grip of the hateful Frapillon she had undergone many pangs. To the first day of captivity, when her aunt had been taken from her violently, had succeeded long hours of despair and solitude. When she awoke from the sleep into which she was plunged by the narcotic, her earliest thought had been of the affections she had left behind her. What had become of those so dear to her, for whom this many a month she had been enduring such dangers and privations? A part of her soul was within the Prussian prison—part in the pavilion walls. And her second mother, whose courage and support had aided her to bear with sorrow, had disappeared, a victim in her turn to the fate which seemed to cling to all bearers of the name of Saint-Senier. Vainly had she overrun all the nooks and corners of her prison, opened all the drawers, and examined all the furniture, she had discovered not the faintest clue. Madame de Muire had suddenly vanished without leaving any trace of her passage. Fatigued with searching, Renée had tried to learn what kind of imprisonment was intended for her. To her great astonishment, Frapillon did not come again, and the resolves with which she shielded herself against anticipated outrage were not put to the test.

In the beginning, not the least of her terrors was the silent loneliness which followed her interview with the pretended physician. Her fortitude wore away from want of an occasion to expend it in a struggle with an enemy who remained intangible. Soon she came to wishing to confront some antagonist rather than waste away in the chafing of uncertainty. Hardly two or three times had she seen the repulsive abigail charged to sweep out the apartments, rare visitations which brought her no enlightenment as to the state of affairs. Even when she overcame her disgust so as to speak to the woman, she only received coarse and evasive replies. Almost always, moreover, Mother Ponisse found the means to lay the table before Renée was up, so that days often passed without her seeing even this subaltern gaoler. At length she paid no heed to the presence or absence of the almost voiceless attendant, considering her as a senseless and inflexible automaton. Hence her life dragged on much as though she had been shut up in the castle of the Sleeping Beauty. The days were long and monotonous, and then followed sleepless nights, entire hours being spent in dozing in the arm-chair, her head thrown back, her eyes closed and her hands clasped. Her soul, benumbed by the torpor of despair, often lost the power of thinking.

When she aroused herself from these naps, she tried to shake off the weighty, leaden prostration and recover some of the energy that had fled from her. Then her sole distraction was to wander in the gloomy garden outside her prison, which she had ample time to scrutinize to the remotest detail. She counted the stones in the walls, tested the solidity of the low door through which Frapillon had fitted, and measured visually the height of the walls separating her from liberty. Ever and ever she saw the impossibility of flight, complete and absolute. For a young woman this innocent looking asylum was a perfect Bastille. She did not even brood over making so impracticable an attempt to escape, and ended by interesting herself in the few plants that pined between the high

walls ; one rose tree, dwindling for lack of sun and attention, became her pet. She cared for it with the devotion inspired by captivity in all prisoners' hearts ; she knew the number of its half dead twigs, and cleared the stem of the hoar frost hung on it each night. These were the occupations and the cheerless joys of her early days. The weather, setting in dry and clear, had always favoured her daily stroll ; but when the snow and rain came, these doomed her to the mournful seclusion of her rooms.

One morning when she was dolefully musing, sitting before the scanty parlour fire, a shuffling sound made her turn her head quickly to see Dr. Molinchard standing behind her arm-chair. He came to inquire after her health in the most affectionate tone, and learn if she stood in need of anything. This interview was most stormy, for Renée did not spare the bitterest rebukes. But she did not succeed in lashing the man out of the gentle reserve in which he had intentionally wrapped himself. Reproaches and prayers had no effect. Molinchard constantly affected to bear himself as if he was dealing with an unreasonable girl who must be brought to her senses by infinite kindness. The irritated lady ended the interview by dashing out into the garden. The doctor cunningly kept away the rest of the day, but he returned on the next, and the next again—in short, every day. From the third visit, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier comprehended : she was held as mad and treated accordingly. This was the sharpest pang of her captivity. After this discovery, she spent several nights without closing an eye, and the prolonged insomnia finally threw her into an over-wrought nervousness. She began to wonder if she were not wrong in her opinion of her mind and if reason had not fled from her by the strain of events. At times she seemed the sport of a dream or hallucination, as if real life had ceased on the night when she quitted her home. She dared no more look in the glass for fear of her own wasted features where her eyes blazed with fever fire. Happily this acute crisis was short.

After a few days' inward struggle and terrible anguish, Renée regained her self-command. Her hale, upright spirit took the upper hand ; her nerves calmed, she coolly reflected, compared the circumstances of her abduction with the singular bearing of her doctor-gaoler, and came to the conclusion that she was involved in some dreadful plot of which the aim eluded her. Her enemies were evidently the same who had stolen away poor Régine and Landreau. As for Madame de Muire, Renée did not doubt, notwithstanding the doctor's evasive replies, that she was languishing in some cell of the horrible place. Without losing time in further conjectures, the courageous girl concentrated all her wits upon the discovery of some means of escape. To flee without aid, by the ordinary means of breaking doors and climbing walls, was a totally impossible thing. She could only hope for assistance from without or other parts of the building. Thereupon she decided to throw about messages like those Taupier had picked up. To do this she had much difficulty. She had no writing-paper, pens or ink, and was obliged to replace them by a piece of charcoal and coarse sugar-paper. Then again the garden walls were very high, and more than once the strength failed her to throw the stone over. Still she did succeed, and had reason to believe that her letters were not lost for she often heard a clamour beyond the wall and, since the next yard was occupied, there were great chances of the curious projectile being picked up. But no news resulted. The doctor, though Podensac had handed him two or three of the scrawls, had never mentioned it to his captive ; hence she wrongly concluded that he knew nothing about them.

As for screaming or calling out, she had the wisdom not to think of that. Her words would not have been distinctly heard, and her cries would only have provoked an increase of watchfulness in her custodian.

Renée did not let herself be disheartened by the non-success of her first attempts. On the day of Valnoir's visit she had recommenced, and she was roaming about and brooding over the results whilst those among whom the strange missive fell on the other side of the wall were seriously affected. When she went indoors, she found Molinchard there, which caused her no surprise, as she was accustomed to his unannounced appearances which had formerly so startled her. Sometimes he darted up in the parlour, as she warmed herself at the fireside; sometimes he popped out at the garden doorway whilst she was strolling in the walks. She knew that he could only introduce himself by the door of communication opening into the dining-room from the interior, but she had never seen him enter. His exits were also as skilfully made, and he well understood how to profit by her turning her back to vanish. However, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier little heeded her keeper's actions. She could expect no good from him and only cared to be rid of his hateful presence as soon as possible. On this day in particular she longed to be alone. A secret presentiment warned her that her message had fallen into hands that would not neglect it. It seemed to her that a change was occurring in her destiny and that she was on the eve of being free. Hence she was less prone than hitherto to listen to the doctor's wishy-washy speeches. She received him with an increase of coldness which did not seem to disconcert him. He was less clumsy and more lively than usual, and Renée even fancied she remarked that his usually dull eyes sparkled with singular lustre.

"How do we find ourselves to-day, mademoiselle?" he inquired with a slight tremor in the voice.

"Very well, sir," replied she, smiling bitterly. "I am surrounded by so much tenderness that I should complain with the worst grace."

"If I could believe you were not mocking at me, I should be so happy," faltered the doctor.

Renée did not take the trouble to reply, but withered him with a disdainful look, and sat down by the fire without further attending to her piteous suitor.

This was almost always her means of putting an end to his interviews, and he generally gave up pursuing them after such hints. He would blurt out some nonsense for form's sake, and beat a retreat in a couple of minutes. But things went on differently this time. He brought a chair to the chimney corner and sat down opposite the girl, a simple action to which he imparted a decided air like a gambler staking all on one turn of the cards. Renée softly wheeled her chair round so that she almost turned her back to him. The doctor's countenance horrified her this evening. But her expressive pantomime was quite wasted, for the obstinate fellow drew his chair up a trifle nearer, and said with rather more confidence:

"Mademoiselle, I have matters of importance to speak of this time."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, and, without looking at him, retorted :

"Where's the good? am I not mad?"

"I never said you were," ejaculated Molinchard, with remarkable vivacity.

"Then why am I here?" drily remarked the lady.

"I am under the impression you came here of your own free will, and at your own wish quitted your home with the help of my friend."

"Ah ! this is too much impudence !" returned Renée. "But you may go on, sir ; I shall not answer a single word."

The doctor, who had come with eminently conciliatory intentions, found himself repulsed at the very outset, and cursed his blundering.

"Good heavens, mademoiselle," he said timidly, "you mistake my meaning, and you will see, if you let me continue, that I have nothing to do with the annoyances you may have encountered here."

He obtained nothing like a reply. To induce her to speak, he would have to give her guarantees of his own frankness, so he resumed :

"I have no reason now to keep back from you that my friend, in bringing you here, assured me that you were suffering from a cruel ailment necessitating the closest attention and entire seclusion."

"No one could more delicately assert that I had lost my reason," ironically commented the young lady.

"I was bound to study your condition scrupulously," went on Molinchard, without resenting the railing interruption, "and I must acknowledge that I had my doubts when you were first brought here."

"Dear me ! merely doubts ?"

"But my conviction is formed, and I am happy to declare that my friend was wrong."

Renée turned round in her chair to look the speaker in the face.

"What? do you grant that I am not insane?" she asked.

"Not only do I grant it, but I am quite ready to bear public witness to it."

"Then open the house door to me at once !" cried Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, springing to her feet.

"Alas ! I only wish I could," sighed the doctor contritely, "and I certainly shall before long, but I entreat you to hear what I have to tell you."

"I am listening," said Renée, curtly.

"Since you came here, grave and sad events have occurred."

She tossed her head testily.

"You must have been astonished at my friend not re-appearing, the one to whom I owe this pleasure, this happiness—"

"Say, the wretch who cowardly deceived me, that will be shorter and more true ! If he has never come again, it is because he knew you would fitly replace him here."

"You are very cruel, mademoiselle ; but I can account for your anger, and excuse it. The reason for my unfortunate friend not reappearing, is because he is no more."

"Ah !" said Renée with indifference.

"Yes, murdered ; his dead body was found at your house door."

"Of which he stole the keys in order to sneak in some night like a thief. What's this to me ?" she demanded haughtily.

"Do you know who is accused of the murder ?" returned Molinchard.

"No, neither do I care."

"The accused persons are those," went on the doctor with an imposing bearing, "who dwelt in the pavilion, and who disappeared on the very night when the crime was committed."

"It's infamous !" exclaimed Renée, "and I prefer to think that you will be the first to prove that it is false."

"No doubt of that, but I do not know that I shall be believed : there is so much mystery in the affair. There is a rumour that there was a man concealed in the house, and—"

"What has happened to him?" inquired the young lady, who had become very pale.

"He got away, but the police are actively pursuing him—as they are yourself, mademoiselle."

She appeared under a deep emotion. It was only after a long silence that she said in a calmer tone to the doctor :

"I do not know what to think of the tidings you bring me ; but since you are willing to own that I enjoy my reason, I have a request to make to you."

"Name it, mademoiselle," eagerly said the doctor.

"To lead me to my aunt, Madame de Muire, who has been parted from me for motives which I do not wish to surmise. Probably those motives no longer exist, and I beseech you to restore the only relative I can consult in my present position. If you do this I—I will be grateful to you."

She had not uttered the closing words without an effort, but she fancied she could see her custodian was animated by kindly intentions, and she resigned herself to softening him.

Instead of responding, he put on an air of hypocritical mournfulness.

"Well, sir?" she inquired.

"I have a great misfortune to announce to you," he said in an undertaker's tone.

"A misfortune ! what do you mean ?"

"Madame de Muire has—has succumbed to her long illness, and—"

"Dead !" moaned Renée, falling back in the arm-chair, "dead ! God help me !"

She hid her face in her hands and melted into tears.

"Such is life," said Molinchard in the conventional tone of consolation which galls true sorrow. "Her ailment was one of those against which science is powerless. I was lavish of all my cares, and I vow to you that I should have saved her, could it have been done."

"Alone ! I am all alone in the world !"

These words burst through Renée's sobs. The treacherous doctor had reckoned on this explosion of grief, and believed this was the opportunity to offer his victim a palliative and a hope.

"Nay, say not that you are alone in the world !" he cried, with a fervour that only made him still more ridiculous ; "nay, there is one who will watch over you, protect you, and—and love you. Yes, I love you, mademoiselle !" said Molinchard, striving to catch her hand.

"Wretch !" cried Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier, rising pale with wrath.

XXI.

RENÉE had imbued the word with so much anger that the doctor drew back frightened.

"What is that you presume to say ?" she queried, crushing him with her look.

He felt the more confounded as he had no experience of such incidents, and this proposal so badly received, was perhaps the first he had risked in all his existence.

"But I—I had no intention of offending you, mademoiselle," he stammered.

"Your presence here is in itself alone an insult, and I insist on your leaving at once."

These scornful words made the lover shrink up, but the democrat was aroused. In this upstart of medical art the envious and spiteful nature took the upper hand, and he forgot the passion which the young noble-woman inspired to remember that she was at his mercy.

"Go!" repeated he with a forbidding smile, "I have not the least inclination that way. I am in my own house and I shall remain."

"Now we have the clue to your treachery!" cried the exasperated lady. "I ought to have expected as much, and I blame myself bitterly for having consented to listen to you. Now, you can kill me as you did my aunt, but as long as I live you shall not come near me."

Before the doctor had time to make a movement, she sprang to the glass door, opened it, and darted into the garden. Molinchard had completely lost his senses, and ran after her, without reflecting that he lost part of his advantages in the open air.

"Help! this way!" screamed Renée in a voice doubled in power by her terror.

"It's no use, my beauty! nobody heeds the insane!" said the villain, gnashing his teeth.

The girl knew he spoke true, and it made her quail. She took refuge in a corner of the yard, pressing so as not to fall against the wall, which separated her from the main court where Podensac had lingered to finish his pipe after his visitors had departed. Molinchard crept up towards her with the step of a tiger going to leap on its prey. His eyes were blazing, and his face was enflamed. His hooked hands quivered with ire, and his contracted mouth frothed out blasphemies. From being ridiculous he had become hideous.

"Will you come in?" he demanded, with a deep, rancorous cry, like the snarl of a ferocious beast.

"Help! murder!" screamed Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier again.

"Ah! I'll soon shut you up!" yelled Molinchard, throwing himself upon her.

But at the moment when he would have seized her, a clear voice rang out from the other side of the wall:

"Hold on! we're coming!" was the cry.

"That bully of a captain," growled the villain, thinking he recognized Podensac's voice, "I defy you getting over here—but I'll pay you out for this all the same."

The doctor had many reasons to laugh at the intervention of the leader of the Forlorn Hope. He relied on mother Ponisse stopping him on the way, and even supposing he found the road to this detached house, he also relied on the good oak-door defending its entrance; and lastly he relied on his habitual falsehoods to explain the scene of violence on the grounds of the recluse's madness. Renée herself had gained a little hope. She had been heard and an answer had come. It was enough to double her courage. And then the sound of the voice, still vibrating, had awakened a memory in her heart.

"Help! help! save me! save Renée de Saint-Senier!"

Two shouts responded to this cry *in extremis*. But she had no time to hear them, for the infamous Molinchard's claws already swept down on

her. Clutched by one iron hand around both her wrists, whilst with the other he sought to gag her, our unfortunate Renée had no other resource than to drop and force him to drag her along the frozen ground. Her force of inertia, all she could oppose, was not adequate for long resisting the robust arms dragging her towards the house. The frightful wretch had lost the remnant of sense left him by his blind and overruling rage. It was no longer his passion which he obeyed in maltreating the young lady, but a furious madness, whipped up by the fear of being caught. He foamed at the mouth, he "saw red," and it was a miracle he did not throttle her on the spot. Perhaps he dared not, perhaps his cowardly and lymphatic nature governed the transports which urged him to commit that crime. The broad daylight doubtlessly awed him, too, and like the nocturnal carnivora, he had to drag his prey into his den. He managed to do so after ten minutes' labour.

The parlour door had remained open. Renée vainly tried to cling to it by a final effort. Molinchard's clenched hand beat hers off that hold, and he threw her exhausted and breathless on the carpet. The monster howled with glee and rushed back to lock the sole issue by which her screams could escape. He returned to her, emboldened by impunity, but a dull sound attracted his attention and clouded the joy of his odious triumph. It was like the noise of hurried steps mingled with excited voices. He stopped to listen, while his victim lay in a swoon at his feet. The noise increased, coming from within the building adjacent to Renée's prison. Molinchard ran to the dining-room, where the communicating passage terminated. There he most plainly heard voices on the other side of the stout oaken panels.

"Here it is," said a man's voice, which he believed to be Podensac's.

"I tell you there is nobody there," replied another croaking voice, which unmistakeably belonged to Mother Ponisse.

What was transpiring in the corridor could be readily pictured; the doctor comprehended that his female Cerberus was endeavouring to moderate the captain's generous impulses.

"Pooh! she will find some way to put off that accursed swaggerer," he hissed between his set teeth.

Hammering with the fist upon the door cut short this consolatory thought.

"Open! hang it all! open! I know you are in there and I mean to get in," thundered the deep bass of the leader of the Forlorn Hope of the Rue Maubuée.

"Yes, try it—the fastenings are solid," muttered Molinchard, fully decided not to give sign of life.

"What, you won't!" went on Podensac; and as he gained no answer, he added, in his tone of command: "Down with it, my lad!"

"Don't you fret! this is my trade!" returned a powerful voice never heard before by the doctor.

Whilst he was wondering who this fresh auxiliary was, a loud cracking made him start away with fear and surprise. The old door bent in under a mighty outward pressure that sorely tried the hinges, and a cloud of dust arose from the shock.

"May lightning crush me! they will break in," groaned the wretch.

But taking a forward step to see the extent of the damage he was almost encouraged. The panel sprang back and the bolt was intact in lock and socket.

"At it again, old chap, and lay it on heavier!" roared Podensac.

A fresh shove made the panel give again, and Molinchard flew back, as if in fear it would fall upon him.

"Mercy! they will smash everything! I'll run for the police!"

"Don't you stir, old woman, or I'll wring your neck."

This dialogue, of which he did not lose a syllable, capped the terror of Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier's persecutor.

"Renée! we are here! coming to your rescue!" said a voice, not previously heard.

"They know she is here! I am lost," moaned the doctor, turning to flee.

Behind him stood his victim, pale, her hair dishevelled, but erect, and her eyes ablaze. He receded as from a spectre, and cowardice swayed the heart of mud.

"Mademoiselle," he faltered, "I do not know what's going on, but I am not guilty—it was—to save you—they come about that murder at the pavilion." He had totally lost his head. "You will forgive me," he whimpered, "you will not accuse me—you will say that I never intended—"

"I shall say that you tried to do me to death as you did my aunt," she rejoined, with a scathing look.

Molinchard growled hoarsely. The lock was bent by a still more sturdy push—one more and all would go.

"By heaven, you're telling no lie! for you shall die!" vociferated the demon doctor, flying at Renée's throat to strangle her.

"Look out, there!" shouted the attacking party; "only one more push! the best come last!"

XXII.

A SHARP crash followed the triumphant words. The huge socket into which the lock shot flew away from the door frame under the assailant's efforts. At the same time the door opened to its full extent and banged against the wall to give admission to the young lady's rescuers. This sudden inrush would have seemed ridiculous had the occasion been less serious. The muscular being whose last shove of the shoulder had wrought such a wonder, found himself suddenly without a support, and consequently was impelled like a cannon ball upon Molinchard who, unfortunately for him, was in the way. He had darted upon Renée to strangle her, we have stated, but he barely had time to touch her throat for, butted fairly in the body by this human projectile, down he went to the ground before he knew what had struck him. At the same time, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier fell into the arms open to receive her, murmuring the name of "Roger."

The lieutenant had rushed into the room as soon as the way was clear, arriving just in the nick of time to catch the drooping girl.

"Renée!" he called. "Renée, are you hurt?"

His betrothed had no power to answer him.

"Carry her into the other room," said Podensac who had not quitted the officer so much as a foot throughout this hasty siege of Molinchard's stronghold.

Roger agreed with him that the lady ought to be given time to recover from her intense emotions, and the two raised her in their arms and carried her to the arm-chair in which a while before she had been insulted by a shameful love proposal. Whilst she was being carried there, the doctor was struggling under the weighty mass of his overthower who had fallen

with and upon him. He moaned inarticulately, and feebly writhed ; but the burly body squeezed in his flat chest, and a hoarse voice roared in his ear these scarcely enlivening words :

“ Aha ! rogue ! ruffian ! I’ve got you, and I’ll give you your last dose ! ”

“ Don’t kill him,” called out Podensac quickly, “ we have need of him ! ”

“ Antoine, let the man get up,” said Roger.

It was an irresistible command he imposed upon this door-breaking Goliath, for he obeyed instantly. He rose rather reluctantly, jerked Molinchard by the throat as if he were a bag, and remarked in the tone set apart for addressing curs :

“ Now, then, up you come ! ”

But the doctor never budged.

“ How about the old cat ? ” inquired Podensac.

“ Hullo ! by the trumpets of Jericho, I believe she has cut her hook,’ shouted the Hercules, quickly turning, for a glance up the passage through the gaping entrance showed him that the doctor’s bond-woman had disappeared. “ No use talking, the old owl has flown,” he added grumbly.

“ I’ll wager she’s gone for the police,” said Podensac.

“ I’ll put a stopper on this rascal doing the same,” said Pilevert, designating Molinchard, and placing himself so as to block up the only exit.

Roger had knelt down before the young lady and was calling her by name and slapping her hands to revive her. She had not lost consciousness, but the commotion she had suffercd had so strained her nerves that she was plunged in a moral and physical powerlessness. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but had neither their lustre nor expression of old. Intelligence seemed to have suddenly died out under the high pallid brow. The joy succeeding the terror and acute pain had so profoundly shattered her fragile organism, that everything was to be feared.

“ Good heavens, what’ll we do ? ” muttered the officer, beating his brow in despair.

“ Faith, sir,” said Podensac, “ if I may offer advice, it is to start off with the pretty child as soon as you can. There is a lot of mystery about here that I cannot make out, but I can see that the place is a bad one for you.”

“ Go,” said Roger, “ yes ; but how ! you see my cousin cannot walk.”

“ Oh, get her away in a cab, of course. But let us free ourselves of this dear doctor to begin with. There is no need of his overhearing our talk, and I can settle my little private account with him by-and-by.”

Perchance Molinchard guessed that he was the subject of conversation, for he got up on hands and knees, and was trying to assume a more normal posture.

“ My hero,” said Podensac to the showman, “ just take hold of this fellow and sling him into the garden yonder.”

“ All right,” growled the athlete professionally.

Before the doctor was able to get upon his feet, he clutched him by the waist, and raising him like a sack of flour, strode into the parlour with the load.

“ This is an outrage ! I protest against such violence ! ” gasped Molinchard, dangling.

“ Ay, ay, squeak away, vermin,” sneered Pilevert. “ Where did you say I was to ‘ chuck ’ him ? ”

“ In there will be better,” answered Podensac, opening the door of the

room in which Madame de Muire had spent the first night of her captivity.

"He might raise a racket in the garden and get his patients to release him, whilst he'll have to keep quiet here."

"One, two, and a go!" said the strong man, flinging the doctor upon the bed with no more ceremony than if he had been a bundle of rags, and so expeditiously that the door was slammed to and double locked before the sufferer had time to offer resistance.

He was fairly and fitly imprisoned, and his resistance evaporated in insults and curses.

"That's what I call work well done," said the leader of the Forlorn Hope; "and now, my trump, do me the pleasure of watching the corridor whilst we make ready for the march out."

Master Antoine, full of the gratification given by the fulfilment of duty, went imperturbably to take up his post.

"Believe me, sir," proceeded Podensac, "you must lose no time in getting off. It is your good star that brought you here to see a wounded comrade: half an hour sooner you would have run up against Valnoir and his princess, to say nothing of Taupier the humpback, persons who seemed to me as if they had come to spy upon the young lady whom Molinchard kept locked up. I do not believe they mean you any good, or her either, and at the present time, the 'red' journalists have plenty of power. Don't wait till they return."

"You are right, captain, and I even fear that their hatred will pursue us beyond this."

"Bah! you have a hold on them now, and all you need to do is to make off. Besides, if you want a witness, hereafter, as to Molinchard's rougery, I need not tell you that you can rely on me."

"Thanks," said Roger, heartily shaking his new friend's hand. "You won't mind helping me carrying the lady to a cab which Pilevert had better go and fetch?"

"Of course not," said Podensac. "Look alive, my Samson," he added to Pilevert, "run as fast as your legs will carry you down to the town hall and drive back in a cab at a gallop."

"I'm off," said Antoine, wheeling half round; but he stopped before he had taken three steps up the passage.

"I don't fancy I shall have to go to the cab-rank," he muttered. "There's a cab coming."

"Good! that's all we wanted to complete our bliss," said Podensac listening.

Pilevert was not mistaken, as they really heard the rolling of cab wheels; a vehicle which had scaled the rugged heights of Montmartre was turning the corner near the villa, its tires noisily crushing the frozen ground.

"It strikes me as the luckiest of chances," said Roger, "and we shall gain time by this."

"I am afraid we shall lose by it, on the contrary," demurred the rifleman, shaking his head. "A vehicle on the top of the Buttes Montmartre, mind you, is a rarity, and I should not be surprised if it be one bringing the police whom that old mole, Mother Ponisse, went after."

"If it is so, I do not fear them," said Saint-Senier.

"You must fear everything as there is Taupier on the other side. However, we shall soon know what we have to do for the cab is stopping."

There followed a moment of silence and anxiety. Pilevert had fallen back on the group formed by the two men standing beside Renée who was still motionless. Hasty steps resounded in the passage.

XXIII.

Was it the police led by the old woman to the assistance of the master of the Villa des Buttes? This seemed probable, and yet it was too late to avoid any intervention, however disagreeable that might prove. So Roger and Podensac showed the best front they could as they waited with their eyes fixed on the doorway. But the steps stopped at the very moment when they expected to see a commissary or even a simple detective agent appear. The new-comer was probably not sure of his way, for he shuffled about audibly, turned back and then began to go away.

"This is queer," muttered the captain of the sharp-shooters, "he doesn't seem to know where he ought to go—he must have lost Mother Ponisse on the road."

"Better go and meet him than seem to hide ourselves," said Saint-Senier, walking towards the door.

As he almost touched it there came a rap without and a man's voice anxiously asked :

"May I come in?"

"Certainly," said the officer,

The stranger turned the knob which alone secured the door, and it easily opened. As he appeared, two outcries arose at the same time :

"The lieutenant!"

"Landreau!"

It was indeed the gamekeeper who arrived so opportunely. He still wore his odd attire, partly military, partly a forest ranger's, but he had considerably aged, his beard and hair having turned white, and his emaciated face bore witness to the anguish and privations he had passed through. But though his face had changed, his heart remained as warm as ever, for he gave way to an outburst of joy on recognising his master. It is useless to say that the latter greeted him as a friend.

"You! it is really you! At last, I see you, Master Roger! and well, too!" said the old keeper, weeping with happiness. "The little dumb girl made me understand that you were cured of your confounded wounds."

"And you, my dear old friend, here you are again, eh? where do you come from?"

These exclamations and questions passed before Landreau could cast a glance on the bystanders. Podensac and Pilevert looked on without comprehending, and the keeper, never having seen them before, took them for uninterested persons to whom he need not pay any attention. But whilst still exchanging friendly speech with Roger, he moved towards the parlour on entering which, his eyes fell on Renée still extended in the arm-chair.

"My young lady!" he exclaimed, throwing himself on his knees beside her. "She too is found again. Kind heaven has been pleased to restore to me all at once."

He took her hand with even more tenderness than respect. But she remained cold and still, looking at him but not seeming to recognize him.

"It is I, mademoiselle, your old Landreau. Oh, I am so happy to see you. There's no one yet to see but Madame la Comtesse."

He obtained no reply and rose affrighted, letting Renée's chilly hand fall beside her.

"What is the matter, in God's name?" he murmured awestricken, and looking to the officer.

"I do not know yet, but I fear something ill," said Roger, "and I want to take her away."

"The sooner the better," appended Podensac.

"That's very easy, lieutenant, for I have a hackney coach."

"Then help me to carry her."

"I think it would not be a bad idea for me to go on the scout," said the captain eagerly. "That old hag is due any moment and only the devil knows who she'll bring with her. And I'm thinking that you won't want her to know where you go."

"Certainly not. All I wish is to put my cousin in safety—that before everything."

"Good! well, let me take a sniff on the Buttes. If I scent nothing suspicious, I'll run back to let you know, then escort the lady to her carriage, and 'drive on cabby!' is the word. Once you are off, I certainly sha'n't tell old Ponisse what became of you; only, I have a bit of a parley to hold with citizen Molinchard, and if he kicks, I promise you that I'll pull his ears."

Without staying for a reply, Podensac darted out into the corridor.

"It is strange," said Roger in a hushed voice. "What pallor—what a silence! Who can tell but what this ruffian's violence has upset her reason."

The fear he expressed was fully justified by the torpor and enfeeblement in which the girl remained.

"The worst is we haven't anything to bring her to, with. Not even a drop of brandy," grumbled Pilevert.

"Don't you worry too much, lieutenant," interposed Landreau, "I have known mademoiselle very well, ever since she was a little child. She is very nervous, mark you, and her heart is so big that when any evil is done, she has a fit. It runs in the family blood. This is not the first time I have seen her in such a state. You know it was much the same thing on the day when her brother was brought back after the duel."

"That's true," muttered the lieutenant.

"And anyhow we shall be home in an hour's time, and you will see how tenderly the little dumb girl will nurse her."

"So you have seen Régine? But, by the way my old friend, how did you come to find us here?"

"She sent me. Oh, I have a long report to make to you, lieutenant."

"I believed you were dead."

"I wasn't much better off. Just think my being two months in the Cherche-Midi prison as a deserter!"

"Deserter?"

"Yes. It's quite a story. But I never shall get done at this rate. All I need say just now is that I was let out. I did not want to go straight back to the pavilion for fear something had happened there while I was locked up. So I looked in at the mansion in the Rue de Anjou to see if the old lodge-keeper who stayed with the new owners could give me any news. And really, on my word, that was a fine idea! What did I learn? that you had got away from Saint-Germain with the girl, that the masters of the mansion had run off before the siege, and that you had come there to live. And while old what's-his-name, the doorkeeper, told me all this, who

should come down the stairs but Régine, who darted into my arms and began telegraphing to me on that slate of hers. Oh ! when she wrote that I should find you here where you had gone to see a wounded comrade, I just ran and found a cab, and except for the popping up stairs to see your—”

“ You have saved us; providence inspired you to come here,” interrupted Roger.

“ How about yourself ! ” returned Landreau. “ To pay a visit to a wounded friend and find Mademoiselle Renée ! But, how was she ever brought to this prison-looking barracks ? ”

“ I do not know, but I know that without me and this brave fellow,” went on the lieutenant, pointing to Pilevert, “ Renée would have been the victim of a villain—”

“ Where is he, the scoundrel ? ” cried the old keeper.

“ He’ll be attended to by-and-by, I answer for that.”

“ And Madame la Comtesse ? did the rascals shut her up somewhere, too ? ”

“ I am ignorant of what has become of my poor aunt, but I shall learn, and I shall avenge all these wrongs upon my family, I promise you.”

Still Renée remained motionless and mute. She knew the fate of her aunt of whom they were speaking and yet she made no stir.

“ The road is clear ! not a soul in sight ! ” shouted Podensac, dashing into the room. “ I recommend your going off like a flash.”

“ Lend a fellow a hand to help the young lady, chair and all,” said Landreau to Pilevert ; “ that will be the best way.”

The Hercules hastened to help him with his powerful arms so that Renée was taken up in a twinkling, and they all went through the corridor towards the street gate.

“ By the way, lieutenant,” said the old keeper, “ you know the great news, of course ? ”

Roger shook his head with indifference.

“ The armistice ! The war is over—we capitulate.”

“ A thousand devils ! ” roared Podensac, “ that’s not possible.”

“ It’s posted up on all the walls. And it appears that anybody can go out of Paris without written permission. Faith, I shall not be sorry to see the Saint-Senier woods again—shall you, lieutenant ? ”

Roger did not answer.

They had reached the door and Renée was put into the cab. The strong man climbed upon the box beside the driver, and Landreau and his master got in with the insensible girl.

“ Good-bye, comrade,” said Podensac, closing the gate ; “ if you take my advice, since the armistice is signed, you will quit Paris not later than to-morrow.”

XXIV.

IT was nearly two months after Roger de Saint-Senier had saved Renée from the ruffianly Dr. Molinchard. It was the middle of March and springtide was being heralded by clear, mild weather. The trees of the Parc Monceaux were becoming covered with buds and the birds greeted the sun with joyful songs. Rejuvenated nature seemed trying to make the Parisians forget the horrors of the siege. This splendid morning could inspire no other feelings save peace and happiness, people had gay faces and

the children capered in the walks. On a seat near the high iron railings along the outer boulevard, two men were seated side by side. They appeared uninfluenced by the flowery season, for they sadly conversed together without heeding what went on around them.

"So, my dear comrade, you persist in striking off at once?" said the elder.

"It must be, captain; I am expected down in Burgundy and I cannot give more than three or four days."

"Well, well, try to push on the work, for I can well understand your being in a hurry to return to your charming cousin, who is soon to become your wife."

Lieutenant de Saint-Senier shook his head and said to Podensac:

"My marriage is fixed, but heaven knows when it will take place."

It was not chance that had brought the two newly made friends together after six weeks' separation.

Saint-Senier arriving late overnight in the capital, had at once taken some furnished lodgings in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, whence he had written to Podensac to come round early. The commandant had shown military punctuality for several reasons. In the first place, he had had absolutely nothing to do since the armistice. The Rue Maubuée dare-devils had been disbanded and he found himself free, but not at ease, as his financial situation was not brilliant. He had kept up a two months' correspondence with Roger, and really intended to preserve friendly relations which might eventually be useful to him. The ex-lieutenant of mobiles, for Saint-Senier also was now discharged, had cordially welcomed the man to whom he was indebted for such signal services, and he had immediately asked him to assist him in a grave matter.

"On the way I will explain to you what it is," said Roger, and Podensac followed him without asking further.

They went through the Parc Monceau, and there commenced the confab upon the seat they now occupied.

"Now then, my dear comrade," said the commander, "let us understand one another clearly before plunging in. You do not mean to fight a duel with that beast Molinchard, do you?"

"With him—no! he is beneath contempt. With somebody else, perhaps; but I first want to clear up one mystery which puzzles me more than anything else."

"Yes, the disappearance of the Countess de Muire. I fear that you will come to nothing without the help of the police, and who can tell if they'll take up the case? Oh, how I regret that you have delayed so long!"

"It was only three days ago I got the clue. You see that I have lost no time."

"What! do you mean to say your betrothed never told you anything?"

"You know her state when we took her out of the prison-house where that scoundrel kept her. As you also know, I managed to get out of Paris with her two days after the armistice; but she arrived, almost dying, at the château de Saint-Senier. She wrestled for fifty days with nervous fits that each time threatened to carry her off."

"Ah, and she could not tell you till after her recovery—"

"How our unfortunate aunt, betrayed into a trap like her, had perchance fallen a victim to the villainy of that man."

"Well, now, I believe that the lady is alive. Molinchard is a villain, but he is cowardly, and he would not load his conscience with a murder."

"Heaven grant you are not mistaken, but if he lied in telling Renée that her aunt was dead, he must say what he has done with her."

"Oh, we'll soon find the way to making him speak out. But I haven't acquainted you with what occurred after your departure in the cab. In about twenty minutes, Mother Ponisse came back furious. At the police-station, they had told her to go to the deuce, they did not care to meddle. When she saw you were all gone, whew ! she wanted to tear out my eyes, but I made her behave herself."

"But that wretch, Molinchard ?"

"I opened his cage door for him, expecting he would fly out. Not a bit of it. He sneaked forth like a lamb, and did not even ask me a word of explanation."

"But he must have given you some ?"

"Wait ! it is quite a chapter. Whilst I was blowing him up for his conduct, the lady-love of that scamp Valnoir came back with Taupier—you know, the humpback, the second at Saint-Germain—"

"The assassin," muttered Roger.

"Very likely ! it's in his line," said Podensac, though he knew nothing about the jugglery with the bullets : "but what I am sure of is that they took my Molinchard into his office, and they all had a 'row' together. I do not know what it was about, but I am willing to wager that the whole gang of the 'Serpenteau' is mixed up in the affair of those poor ladies."

"So am I sure of it," said the lieutenant. "That's an account to be settled hereafter."

"I will help you, if you like ; but to get through with my tale. When I saw how things were turning out in that confounded ambulance, I packed up my bag and marched out without saying good-bye even to Molinchard, the blackguard !"

"Since when—"

"Oh ! I spent the time getting well in a somewhat better infirmary at Passy, and now that I recovered the use of both arms, they are quite at your service."

"Thanks, commandant," said Roger, "I accept, and you may count upon my gratitude and on my friendship."

"Faith, my dear comrade," cried Podensac, "you make me feel fine by what you say, for I have had quite enough of a parcel of ne'er-do-wells not worth a Prussian's worn-out Bluchers ; and although I may not always have carried myself as straight as I ought, there is yet time for me to pass at the final inspection."

"I do not know what you have to reproach yourself with, commandant, and I don't want to know, but I shall never forget what you did at Bezons bridge."

"Pshaw ! that's not worth naming now-a-days. It was only a debt I was paying the little dumb girl, who told me my fortune at Rueil once upon a time. By the way, what has become of the dear little witch ? You wrote to me that you had taken her into the country with that stout chap, who gave old Molinchard's door such a capital punch. I am sure that she nursed Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier finely. A queen of hearts, she is ! and only to think that I fancied she would let that monster Taupier love her !"

"She did, indeed, take care of my cousin with admirable devotion," said Roger sadly, "but she has again left us."

"Never !"

"Yes, on the day when Renée was saved, she disappeared from the château."

"And her trainer, the showman?"

"He asked to go away before the first week was over. I believe he was longing for his old calling."

"Who can go against such things? the girl went back to join him in the show," said Podensac, philosophically. "But I suppose you are not leaving Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier by herself?"

"Certainly not; to say nothing of our old servants and our good Landreau, there is—is one of our kinsfolk," said Roger, quickly checking his first intention. "But it seems to me that we ought to be on our way to Montmartre."

"It's a quarter to nine," said the commandant, looking at his watch. "At half-past we shall be on the heights, and we shall catch Molinhard getting up."

The two rose, passed through the park gates, and started along the boulevard. At so early an hour, this quarter was commonly enlivened by passing workpeople and clerks coming down from the Batignolles; but, that day exceptionally, the pavement was almost deserted. The two friends barely saw more than a few national guards in undress running separately towards Montmartre. On reaching the Place de Clichy, they found an infantry detachment grounding arms around the statue of Marshal Moncey. But they felt no curiosity as to the cause of the gathering, and they continued on their way along the thoroughfare. They had reached the club-house where Taupier had been wont to hold forth, when they perceived a considerable crowd on the Place Pigalle; bayonets glittered, and there was a hubbub like that preceding a riot or revolution.

"What the mischief are they up to yonder?" said Podensac; "can the Prussians be coming back again, or—"

He had not finished ere the thunder of a discharge of musketry broke upon his ears.

XXV.

IT was not so much a volley as the brisk fire of a skirmishing party. In any case, blank cartridges were not used, for the two or three bullets whizzed over the friends' heads. Roger did not pay any great attention, but Podensac was literally stupefied.

"Halloa!" he said, "have they all gone mad hereabouts? or are they going in for another revolution?"

"Let's go on," said Saint-Senier; "we shall see what it is."

They had not taken twenty steps along the boulevard before they came into collision with a human sea of women and children, who were running so fast that they nearly knocked down Podensac. He tried to stop one good citizen who was tearing on, but the old gentleman wrenched himself out of his hands with inarticulate exclamations.

"I can't make it out," said the commandant, as they strode along the side-walk.

Roger and he elbowed the disorderly mob aside, but they did not get along quickly, as they were going against the current.

Near the Place Pigalle, the shouts and cheers redoubled, but the firing had ceased. As for the outcries, it was impossible to distinguish their meaning.

"They are yelling 'Long live—' something or other, but I cannot tell what," remarked the lieutenant.

They were passing the Rue Lepic, when they met a troop of dreadful ragamuffins who were howling as they ran :

"We are betrayed ! to arms ! they are slaughtering our brothers !"

"Oho, I begin to get an inkling," said Podensac, who had seen the previous Revolution.

"Look !" said Roger, nudging his elbow, forcibly.

A platoon of gendarmes came along the street at the double quick, clearing off the crowd, which let them pass but howled hostilily. They kept their ranks and marched on silently. Saint-Senier went up to speak to their officer about the event, but he dared not question him when he took a good look at him. He was an old grizzled moustachio'd lieutenant, on whose energetic but long-drawn face Roger saw a look of intense disgust.

"Phew !" sighed Podensac, "the regulars are getting out of it—and I believe that we are in a muddle again. I am willing to bet that those jokers on the 'Serpenteau' have got a finger in this pie."

"Go on," replied Saint-Senier, thinking far more about Molinchard than revolutions.

After pushing on and being pushed, they came out upon the square. As they got there, the last soldiers who had not broken ranks, were retiring by the adjacent streets and the victorious populace were whirling about in frightful disorder. The most nonsensical vociferations resounded. Some fellows sang the Marseillaise Hymn, some danced, while others were running about in all directions.

"Thunder ! it's no joke," said Podensac, pointing out to his companion a large pool of blood on the stones.

A little further on, the crowd had gathered before the door of a booth into which a wounded man had been carried. Mingling with them, the commander had not many questions to ask before he learnt which way the wind of revolt blew. The unpatriotic plotters who did not shrink from preparing an insurrection even when the enemy was at the gates of Paris, the conspirators who had fattened for six months on the misfortunes of their country, had now attained their end. The first day of the Commune had arrived.

"I suspected as much," whispered Podensac after being enlightened ; "if you'll believe me, we'd better retreat in good order and put off your visit till to-morrow."

"No," replied Roger in a tone leaving no doubt as to his resolve to finish matters that day.

"But, look you, a trip on to the Buttes seems to me dangerous for me not wearing a blouse or a national guard's uniform."

"I will go alone then," said Saint-Senier, rather curtly.

The other coloured and hastened to add :

"My dear comrade, I thought you knew me better. If you stick to running the risk to-day, I am with you. What I said was rather for your own sake, for I don't fancy that I am risking anything much myself."

Roger pressed his hand silently and begun cleaving the crowd.

"Let me go on first," said Podensac, "I know the shortest road and I hope we shall pull through right enough."

Suiting his action to his words, the ex-rifleman pushed forward. They had a deal of trouble to get away from the Place as inquisitive people were flocking there every instant, but they did manage at last and then took a steep street running up to Montmartre. There the crowd was less

compact, still they had to step aside to avoid an armed troop rushing down like an avalanche. It was a Federal battalion parading a dozen hapless foot-soldiers in triumph.

"That's a pretty prize to brag of!" sneered Podensac, scanning the bewildered mien of the poor recruits who carried their guns muzzle downwards with the look rather of prisoners than conquerors.

The band swept on, roaring insults and so-called patriotic songs. Pursuing their ascent, the pair reached a broad street at the end of which on their right they saw the Montmartre town hall; but they had scarce set foot there before they were carried away by a veritable popular torrent. The Place Pigalle mob was a mere garden party to this tempestuous concourse, a muddy sea amongst the waves of which surged up horses and cannon and a swarm of men in blouses. The rioters had pulled the gunners off their horses and were dragging the guns up to the Buttes. Women were on the caissons and children pushed at the wheels. Podensac regretted having taken this road. He even tried to turn back; but there was no getting out of the tide, once in, they had to yield. Thus they were borne the whole length of the street almost without touching the ground, and it was only at the base of a mound planted with acacias that they could take breath. The steepness of the ascent stopped the cannon's advance and the mob had to await reinforcements at this station. So Podensac succeeded in working out on one side.

"We are clear of the squeeze," he said to Roger, who had kept close to him. "I know a path leading near the La Galette mill which will take us to Molinchard's all right."

Indeed he piloted so well that in less than ten minutes he and Saint-Senier reached some waste land under a battery thrown up during the siege. This esplanade seemed unoccupied, and they crossed it without meeting anybody; but on turning the corner, they fell upon a cluster of national guards. These surly-looking fellows seemed posted here to stop traffic, for they collared them at once.

"Where are you going, citizens?" demanded the chorus.

"To Dr. Molinchard's Asylum," answered Podensac, unhesitatingly.

"Molinchard? don't know him," replied the troop together, and the apparent leader said in a commanding voice: "Come along to the Committee's."

"The Committee's? don't know it," retorted Podensac with annoyance.

"Oh, you want to make game of me, do you?" cried the man wearing the stripes. "Grab those scamps, lads!"

XXVI.

"Are you out of your minds?" cried the furious Gascon.

"By what right do you stay us?" inquired Roger, rather disdainfully.

"You'll find that out when you appear before the committee," said the commander of the squad.

During this short, sharp colloquy, his surly-looking comrades closed in around our two friends, who found three men on each side before they could raise a hand.

"I told you so," whispered Podensac to Saint-Senier.

"You cannot really mean to arrest us!" exclaimed the lieutenant.

"Can't we, though? we'll give you aristocrats all the arrest you want," sneered a hangdog-looking fellow.

Roger, who was in an ill-humour, mechanically clapped his hand to his side for the sword he had been accustomed to wear; but he remembered he was without arms. At the same moment Podensac nudged him and he restrained himself, less from fear of the bayonets, than from the repugnance of having to have recourse to fisticuffs.

"March!" cried the ferocious faced fellow, who seemed to command the others.

They looked like tramps fresh from sleeping on the street benches, and affected the manners and costumes of the operatic brigands. But the leader was a thin fellow, wearing immeasurable moustaches and a needle-pointed imperial, a red braided jacket, and a broad-brimmed felt hat, with an ostrich plume waving in the wind. It was not hard to recognise in this theatrical bandit, one of those cosmopolitan adventurers who travel Europe to sell their worthless revolutionary sword. Podensac, who had been intimate with the heterogeneous officers of the various corps of free-shooters, looked hard at this one to see if he knew him, but his memory did not recall this particular swashbuckler. The fantastic volunteer rifles of the siege were already surpassed in burlesque show.

"Pooh," he whispered to his friend. "Let 'em alone and we'll see what this celebrated Committee is. It will be incredible bad luck if I do not find some old crony on it."

The arresting party did not seem to know very clearly what road to take, and even seemed disposed to remain before the earthwork, when the chief desperado said a few words to his pirate brethren, and they marched on again. Following the road Roger and the Gascon had come by, they reached an uphill street on the right, under the mill, where they fell in with the mob again. Up this way came those who wished to precede the cannon, while they who wished to carry the news elsewhere went down. It resulted from these two contrary movements that they progressed slowly. The federals at the head tried to make way by punching the loiterers with their rifle-butts, a non-democratic proceeding which succeeded badly. In a single instant they were all surrounded and squeezed in, all advance becoming quite impossible. Podensac exchanged a rapid glance with his companion, and rose on tiptoe to try to spy a friend by face in the throng.

"Dash it all," he muttered, "I can't see a single one of my Forlorn Hope."

Whilst he was thus deplored his ill-luck, the plumed chief felt the need of speechifying to the people.

"Make way, fellow citizens!" he called out with a strong Italian accent, "let us take our prisoners on to the Committee."

To speak of prisoners before an excited mob was to fire its passions. The heroes of Montmartre considered themselves charged with guarding the cannon for defence of their own part of the town, and any stranger appearing thereabouts could only be an enemy. In the name of independence, these intelligent insurgents commenced by interdicting their fellow-citizens from access to their mons sacrum.

"Prisoners!" roared the confused mass; "they're spies! down with the men who massacre the people!"

The two friends looked at each other: Roger was very pale, but proud in bearing, and the Gascon, although more affected at heart, did not present a less firm mien.

"Let us pass, friends," said the leader of the band; "the Committee will deal out justice."

"I hope so," hissed Podensac, between his teeth.

The name of "the Committee" already had a mysterious influence over the mob, and, with the rifle-stocks aiding, the escort could get on. The furies and bloodhounds who had howled for the prisoners' death, easily rallied at the hopes of seeing them tried, and followed on. It took full twenty minutes to reach the Place de l'Eglise, but they did reach it, and here the Fra Diavolo in command ordered his men to turn to the left and then to the right. Saint-Senier had never been to Montmartre, excepting on the day of visiting the Molinchard Asylum, and then he had taken another road—hence he did not know whither they were conducting him, and looked on everything with astonishment. They entered a narrow alley, paved with uneven jagged stones, and highly walled in. But for the tumult and throng disturbing this solitary quarter, one might have believed oneself in some mountainous hamlet a thousand miles from Paris. At the first turning of this walled passage, the guards came to a tattered sentry, with whom they exchanged some mysterious password. Podensac had not believed they would meet such militarily organised watchfulness on these heights, and he began to believe that matters might get worse. Saint-Senier, who had far less studied the Parisians since the armistice, saw, however, nothing in his arrest but an awkward check. After the parley with the escort, the federal sentinel called up the guard, a dozen armed fellows who came out of a low door. They were specimens of all the styles of insurgents, some of them in blouses and unnumbered caps, some as foot soldiers, some as light cavalry, with a fanciful rifleman, and two Garibaldians. All these irregulars acted with a decision and uniformity which proved the existence of a guiding hand. In an instant the alley was blocked up by a picket to keep back the crowd. The prisoners were brought into a narrow yard, and thence into a garden where a similar sight awaited them. It was filled by a band of federals in quaint uniforms walking or standing about in knots, their guns stacked along a high wall. They hailed the procession with shouts of laughter, but did not show much astonishment, from which it was supposable that other prisoners had already been led to the revolutionary head-quarters. Over this garden towered a two storey house, from which a loud hubbub issued.

"Well," said Podensac, trying to seem more at ease than he was, "are we going to see your famous Committee at last?"

"In an instant, citizen," said the scarlet-jacketed man; "the Committee is sitting, and as soon as the present trial is over your turn will come."

"Trying," repeated Podensac. "Who are being tried, may I ask?"

"The enemies of the people," rejoined the leader.

"The deuce! I did not know that the people had many enemies and that here was its palace of justice. It looks more like a military camp," he added, pointing to the national guards and their guns.

"That's the firing-party," explained the other, eyeing the Gascon hard.

"Oh! perfectly organized, as far as I can see," said the commander, always becoming brave before visible and present danger.

His coolness seemed to make some impression on the communist.

"The people are just, citizen," he said, moderating his voice, "and if you are not an enemy, you have nothing to fear."

"I hope so," said Podensac.

"However, citizen, you can go in now," retorted the man with the feather, pointing to the house door which was opening.

XXVII.

Two federals with loaded guns came out at the doorway.

"Who's next?" bawled one, a tall tattered vagabond who seemed drunk.

"We!" answered Podensac, loudly.

"Then, come along and no dawdling. The Committee does not like to be kept waiting."

"No more do I," retorted the commander. "Let me speak when they question us," he added to his partner in misfortune. "I fancy I can get out of it and clear you, too."

Roger merely nodded his consent, and the two went arm-in-arm across the threshold, followed by the plumed chief. The two federals, opening the march, climbed a flight of stairs to the first landing where they fell off severally to the right and left like regular soldiers.

"Go in, citizens," said they at the same time, in tipsy voices.

"Where?" queried Podensac, who saw two or three closed doors before him.

The reply came quickly but not from the national guards. One of the doors opened and a man appeared saying in a solemn tone that would have done honour to a law court usher.

"Bring in the accused!"

"We're the accused, I suppose," said Podensac. "Let's have a look at this celebrated tribunal which tries people off hand."

He advanced, closely followed by Saint-Senier, who appeared highly indifferent to the burlesque ceremony. They entered an oblong hall, poorly lighted by one window from the garden they had passed through. Armed men, along the walls, seemed to represent public force within this strange court room. A bench of five or six judges who pronounced the sentences of the people, officiated behind a table, their backs to the window. Hence their countenances and attire were barely discernible. Nevertheless, Roger thought they almost all wore the national guard cap and overcoat. A space was kept between them and the audience filling the end of the hall. The plumed bandit, who seemed familiar with this court's expeditious proceedings, shoved his two captives forward and then stationed himself respectfully before the judges.

"Make your report, citizen," said the chief judge, in a voice not unknown to Podensac.

"Citizens," replied the leader of the escort, "I was on duty with my men by order of the Committee near the battery of La Galette Mill when we caught these two men sneaking along the esplanade and spying the ground."

"A lie!" cried Podensac.

"Silence among the accused," squeaked the same voice, which the Gascon had already noticed.

"My orders were to arrest all suspicious characters," now resumed the leader, "so I arrested these men without listening to their excuses and brought them here."

"You did quite right, citizen, and you can return to your post."

This fashion of hearing and dismissing witnesses augured ill for the decisions of this improvised tribunal, but Podensac prepared to hold his own in the discussion. As for Saint-Senier, he had so little experience in popular

uprisings that he still believed that this was some coarse joke. The chief of the squad went out without hurrying, no doubt to resume his intending exploits on the Buttes. The two friends were left to face the judges and awaited examination.

"Come nearer, you two!" called out the chief justice, rudely.

This singular magistrate had been wriggling in his seat without any care about his dignity. He bent forward and shielded his eyes with his open hand, evidently seeking to scan the features of his prey. Perplexed himself, Podensac willingly obeyed the order he received, and took three steps towards the table to get a closer look at the man who spoke so imperatively. But in the reciprocal inspection, the advantage was not with the commander, who had the light in his eyes whilst his adversary had it behind him.

"What's your name?" abruptly demanded the presiding judge, who, for all his straining and frowning, did not seem to succeed in recognising the accused.

"Podensac, of course! I say, are none of the boys from the Rue Mau-buée here?"

At this name, and the appeal to his popular connections, the judge started up from his seat and quivered, but showed his surprise in no other manner.

"And what's your name?" he demanded of Roger.

"I do not acknowledge your right to question me," said the lieutenant, "yet I do not mind informing you that I am Roger de Saint-Senier and that I was an officer in the garde mobile."

At this reply the judge wriggled about more than ever. Podensac had jogged his friend with his elbow to prevent a fresh imprudence, for it was one to speak of the provincial militia before the Montmartre revolutionists. But before giving rein to his eloquence, he wished to have a good look at his judges and so he advanced close to the table.

"Look here, I think it high time this *game* was over," said he to the chief justice. "I am as sound a citizen as you, and I hope—what!" here he interrupted himself by roaring with laughter, "this is rich! this is altogether too funny!" he cried. "Why, it's old Taupier!"

He held out his hand to the august president with the firm conviction that the latter would eagerly grasp it. But the rigid functionary drew back with dignity, and emphasized his refusal to fraternise by this stern sentence:

"When I preside over the Committee I know no acquaintances."

"Well, hang your impudence!" muttered Podensac, staggered.

Yet, with a little perspicacity or reflection, he would have been less astonished at Taupier's denying their former connection. The humpback—for it was he in reality whom the chances of the insurrection had borne to power—had long cherished sentiments towards the commander into which kindness did not enter. Their last meeting had taken place on the day when Renée de Saint-Senier was so miraculously snatched from Molinchard's clutches. Since then Taupier had preserved an old leaven of rancour and distrust against the involuntary confidant of his intrigues. He might not have carried his hatred so far as to seek him out to "suppress" him, pursuant to his favourite idea; but since chance delivered him up to him, he would not hesitate to profit by it so as to close his mouth forever. Besides, the name and presence of Saint-Senier had created a prodigious effect upon the vindictive abortion, whose recollections of Saint-Germain and

the pavilion were aroused. At last, he held his revenge. Roger had not recognised in the twilight the assassin of his cousin, whom he had only seen at the duel. His mind, too, was far remote from the grim realities impending.

"Citizens," said Taupier, raising his voice, to be better heard by the audience, "here we have two men found roaming about without good reason near to the cannon which the Reaction is trying to snatch away from us."

"That's true so far," said the irrepressible Podensac.

"I will interrogate them," proceeded the humpback, ignoring the interruption, "and the Committee will deal with them straightway."

"Yes, yes!" shouted the public.

As the uproar, excited by this agreeable preamble, reached its height, the door opened softly, and a fresh character glided into the hall.

XXVIII.

THE individual who entered seemed to wish to mix himself up with the lookers-on, but his tall stature prevented that. Indeed, he was a head taller than the Garibaldians and national guards forming the public of this mock tribunal. This man wore the indispensable insurrectionist fatigue-cap, set clumsily over long, lank locks with the oddest effect. The rest of his costume was peculiar: part civilian, part military; he had a sky-blue neckcloth, with loose ends, a brown cloth frockcoat, with red epaulets, and buff trousers, with a stripe down the leg.

Never did a parrot display a more startling combination of hues. In any other place, the entrance of such a glorious scarecrow would have created a stir, but the most eccentric costumes seemed to be keeping an appointment here, and no one turned to contemplate this additional fright. Indeed Podensac, who had sharp eyes and a clear wit, notwithstanding his dilemma, was the only one to remark him. Soon, he thought the peculiar figure not unknown to him, and appealed desperately to his memory.

"Accused," said Taupier to Saint-Senier, "what did you come to the Buttes for?"

Roger hesitated ere replying, in repugnance at justifying himself to such fellows; but he reflected that liberty was only to be had at that price, and he had a sacred duty to perform that day.

"I was going to see a person who resides near here," he curtly replied.

"Really!" said the deformed judge, "you choose a nice time for paying friendly calls, my boy!"

This pleasantry obtained great success in the auditorium, for approving laughter rang out, and encouraged Taupier to play his part as a revolutionary Rhadamanthus according to his own jeering nature.

"I forbid you to address me in that manner," scornfully said Saint-Senier, beginning to feel angered.

"Do you hear that, citizens?" squealed the burlesque magistrate, "here's a reactionary who wants to be my lorded and talked to as if he were on the top of the tree."

"That will do, Taupier," broke in Podensac, "don't you put on such airs with old mates of yours."

This direct reproof evoked some murmurs in the public, but the result was to curtail the humpback's levity for the moment.

"And what's the name of the person who resides near here?" he asked, in a less arrogant tone.

Podensac was opening his mouth to answer with the name of one of his company whom he knew lived in Montmartre, for he felt the danger of speaking the truth, but Saint-Senier, impatient at all the questioning, replied before him.

"I wanted to see a person named Molinchard, who keeps an ambulancy near here; you ought to know him, for he's one of your own crew," said the imprudent officer, sharply.

This avowal came near settling his fate. The humpback was fixed as to the motive which had brought Renée's cousin to the doctor. It could only be to make inquiries very dangerous for him, Taupier. This opportunity of getting rid of the young officer who meddled with his affairs was too fine a one to be neglected.

"Dr. Molinchard is an excellent citizen," he said, with perfidious softness; "and if he will answer for you the Committee will set you at liberty, even though you are very deeply suspected. We will send for him, and see if he—"

"That's useless," interposed Saint-Senier, "he has never seen me."

Podensac was angrily gnawing his nails.

"Do you hear that, citizens?" squeaked the humpback, tragically, "this is an attempt to trick popular justice."

"Ay, ay, he's an aristocrat! a disguised spy! shoot him!" rose from all corners of the hall.

The captain of free-shooters opined that it was time he should interfere.

"Stuff and nonsense! I say, you fellows," he shouted, "just you be friendly enough to hear me a bit. I am no aristocrat: I am known for something else, and I did not lead the Rue Maubuée Enfants-Perdus all through the siege to go playing the spy against Frenchmen."

This little speech, uttered firmly, told favourably on the throng. But the humpback was too deeply interested in finishing up matters not to nip Podensac's appeal in the bud.

"Ask friend Taupier, though he pretends not to know me, whether I am a spy or no?" said the captain.

"I am not saying so about you," said the president, thus cornered, "but you keep precious queer company."

The astute humpback wished to be rid of Saint-Senier rather than Podensac, and this insinuation had no other object than to induce the ex-freeshotter to divide his cause from his friend's. Happily, he was not to be tempted.

"I can answer for the company I keep," said he, "and if you'll lend me a corporal's guard to go after Molinchard, I promise you that he'll stand bail for my friend, whether he ever saw him or not."

The gallant-hearted Podensac reckoned reasonably on making the doctor serve him, having arguments in reserve of a nature to influence Renée's gaoler. But Taupier divined as much, and hastened to ward off the thrust by a catch phrase.

"The people have no time to waste," he said, with emphasis. "What assurance have we that the satraps of the powers that be are not now coming to try and remove by force the cannon which they want to surrender to the Prussians?"

The audience shuddered.

"Hark, citizens! do you hear that?" proceeded the humpback, marking the effect he had produced.

He had risen to fortify his eloquence by a gesture, and, sprawling forward, he pretended to listen. In reality, there was a distant roll of drums to be heard.

"The Reaction beating the rally!" screamed Taupier.

These intentionally spoken words were the signal for a frightful uproar. The cowards crowded for the door, and as they were in the majority, there would not have been enough for a quorum left if notes had been taken. But in this case, as in many others, the extreme minority ruled. A score of maddened federals spread over the empty space, and howled for the prisoners' death. The fiercest even started to seize hold of them, but recoiled on seeing their fearless attitudes. Unfortunately, resistance could not have lasted long against such a number of antagonists, and the two would have been dragged away, had it not been for an intervention changing the aspect of affairs. The long-haired individual had so far kept modestly in the herd, but at this decisive juncture, he took an immense stride, which brought him into the centre of the group before the tribunal.

"As a member of the Committee, I claim the right to be heard," he began.

This lengthy personage, no doubt, enjoyed considerable notoriety among the federals, for his intrusion produced general attention.

"It's that living ramrod who speaks so grandly," muttered some of the regular frequenters of political meetings.

"It's the clown we met in the forest of Saint-Germain," exclaimed Podensac, at the same time. "I knew I had seen that phiz before, somewhere."

Alcindor, for indeed it was he, only noticed this qualification with a lofty glance, it being one he had lost the habit of hearing since his democratic greatness. As for Taupier, although much annoyed by this incident, he could not refuse his influential colleague's request.

"Speak, citizen, but be brief, for the people are waiting."

"Citizens," began the golden-tongued Alcindor, "what do you require? To have justice done and traitors punished, say?"

"Ay, ay! shoot 'em!"

"I wish the same," resumed the orator, "and verily, these men being agents of the Reaction, merit capital punishment."

"Oh! you scamp," muttered Podensac.

"It's true! death, death!" bellowed the spectators.

"But, citizens, do you know what 'hostages' are?"

This question excited a murmur which showed that the audience had no very clear idea of the meaning of the word.

"Hostages, citizens," continued the literary minded clown, "have from the earliest antiquity, served as guarantees against the treachery of the foe. They are prisoners securely kept, whilst the enemy is forewarned that they will be slain if they dare touch a hair of the head of any member of our grand and glorious federation."

"Not a bad idea!" said several.

"What an idiot," snarled Taupier.

XXIX.

"CITIZENS," proceeded Alcindor, "I was saying that hostages are a guarantee against treacherous enemies. Now, who ever carried treachery so far as these vile conservatives, who profit by the darkness to steal like

thieves to the summit of the Buttes—which you have converted into the citadel of liberty ?”

“Can’t he talk, though ?” said a federal.

“I believe that the victory of the people is certain, but yet it may be delayed.”

“No, no !” protested Taupier, inwardly chafing at the clown’s unreasonable prolixity.

“Who can vouch for this,” continued Alcindor at the top of his voice, “that one of us may not fall into the hands of the supporters of tyranny ?”

“That’s so—he’s right !”

“Who can vouch for this, that at this very moment the monarchists are not preparing an offensive movement, and that this same evening, within an hour, perhaps, they will not surround Montmartre and seize the members of this Committee that you have appointed ?”

“Rubbish !” commented the humpback.

“That drum which you hear may be the signal of the attack.”

Struck by the truth of this argument, several warriors hurried out of the door.

“Well, citizens, in case of misfortune, we have here two prisoners whose lives will answer for those of our comrades who may be seized by the gendarmes.”

Approving cheers hailed this conclusion, the listeners clearly relishing the proposed safeguard.

“Why, this is absurd,” remonstrated Taupier, who wished to end all then and there ; “do you imagine that the government value these two nobodies a penny ? If they take you, these will not prevent them shooting you.”

“Excuse me, citizen president,” said the pertinacious clown, “you are forgetting that one of them is or has been an officer in that garde-mobile which has always been the firmest support of the government we have overthrown.”

“The more reason for filling his head with lead,” said the humpback.

“Besides, I recognise him : he is a nobleman, one of the scions of that feudal race which chained our fathers to the soil ; his family is rich and powerful, and to ransom him it would get ten of our comrades released.”

“The triple-fool is mad,” moaned Taupier, despairing of checking this verbal flux.

“As for his fellow prisoner,” continued on the imperturbable Alcindor, “he is not of less importance, and—”

“By thunder ! I rather believe I am of importance,” broke in Podensac, only too glad to bear out his improvised defender’s plea ; “if my friend be worth ten national guards, I am worth thirty, for he is only lieutenant, and I am full captain ! in proof of which I have my commission in my pocket,” he said, clapping his hand to his pocket-book.

“Never mind, we don’t want to see your papers,” screamed the exasperated humpback.

“Of course you don’t, you old bag of bumps and humps,” retorted Podensac. “Citizens,” he went on in a hail-fellow-well-met tone to the assemblage, “you don’t know what chums our good Taupier and I are. You wouldn’t dream it, though, would you, seeing the hurry he is in to get me put out of the way ?”

The president saw that the general opinion was turning against him, and the thought made him lose all self-command.

"Indeed I know you," he screamed, with a profusion of fantastic gestures. "I know you—and how, during the siege, you served the Prussians as a spy. At Rueil I caught you—"

"At the house of your mate Mouchabeuf, eh? you do well to bring up that double-dealing innkeeper—"

"Citizens, you are out of order," said the ever-formal Alcindor.

Taupier saw he was on the wrong tack, and changed his course instantly.

"Come, come, citizen Panaris, let us reason this out," he said more gently. "You speak of keeping these two traitors as hostages to exchange them if we are caught."

"And no fool of a dodge either," muttered a prudent federal.

"But if the Reactionists take the Buttes, they will take our prisoners at the same time. Oblige me by saying what good will we have done by caging them?"

"That's so!" chorused the crowd.

"Allow me, citizen president," argued the clown like a professional lawyer, "I suggest keeping them, but not here."

"Whereabouts, then? Are we masters of the prisons? Have you got the keys of Pélagie or La Roquette in your pocket?"

"We shall have them to-morrow."

"Possibly; meantime, if the gendarmes scale the hill we shall be grabbed and the birds let go."

"Never! I know a place where nobody will find them, and I'll take them there if the brave citizens here present will assist me."

"Ay, ay, we'll go," shouted the federals, with remarkable unanimity.

Taupier had exhausted his objections and bit his lip at seeing his prey escape him. Podensac triumphed, and Saint-Senier also understood that respite was safety. But they both had the same misgiving as regarded the ex-patterer of the show-booths. Was he of good faith in his theory about hostages, or did he use the pretext to save them? The commandant inclined to the latter opinion, having much difficulty in imagining Alcindor become ferocious in becoming a politician. What little Roger knew about Régine's professional brother also led him to believe in his good intentions, but he relied mainly on his own ability to extricate himself from his awkward position. Once out of this den, he reasoned that it would not be hard for him and Podensac to break away from a picket of these make-believe soldiers led by this overgrown jack-pudding. But the puzzle was to get out.

"Citizens," said the humpback, who had been hatching an infernal trick, "I respect the decisions of the people, and as it is your advice to keep these two men for the time, I do not oppose their removal."

"It looks like clearing up," thought the Gascon, winking to his companion in tribulation.

"Only," went on the abortion, "it is indispensable that the Committee should know where the prisoners are going, and I request Citizen Panaris to communicate his plan to me."

"Willingly, Citizen President," Alcindor said; "but to you alone, for I do not wish our hostages to know it, and they must be taken there blindfolded."

"Deuce take it! this changes the look-out," muttered the commandant.

The ex-clown went up to the table, and bent down to the humpback's ears, not without performing a gymnastic feat, considering the latter's

stature. After a short colloquy, like guard and relief-guard over the watch-word, the two members of the Committee resumed their respective positions, and Taupier solemnly pronounced :

“ Remove the condemned men ! ”

“ Don’t blindfold me here,” said Podensac ; “ I don’t want to break my neck on the stairs.”

“ No, no, citizen, in the street will do,” said the polite pupil of Pilevert the showman.

“ March ! ” cried the commander, as though he were again at the head of his *Forlorn Hope*.

Five or six volunteers surrounded the prisoners, and the party, preceded by the oratorical clown, went down to the ground floor. The Committee resumed business, being in permanent session according to the inevitable custom of all revolutionary committees, and called for more culprits. When Roger and Podensac reached the garden, they found a change. The mob had increased in an enormous proportion ; sinister-faced men in blouses, ragged hags, and squalid boys had swarmed in a hideous mass over the open space and around the guards. The men had guns, the women clubs, and the youths stones. This was the army of the gutter. The appearance of the prisoners was hailed with horrible hurrahs, and the two friends felt that their greatest peril was here. Nevertheless, the escort sought to clear a passage, and Alcindor was about to harangue the ruffians when the first-floor window opened.

“ Citizens,” cried Taupier’s hoarse voice, “ let pass the two spies whom the Committee reserves for future punishment.”

The abominable humpback had calculated the full range of this ambiguous declaration. An explosion of rage rose from the throng.

“ No, no ! death now, at once ! ”

With these sanguinary yells, they rushed upon the prisoners.

XXX.

SAINT-GERMAIN, the prettiest of the Parisian suburban towns, became during the dark days of the Commune the chosen refuge of the fugitives from its tyranny. Existence there was not what one would call boisterously gay, for each blow in the dreadful struggle about the capital had a repercussion in these poor exiles’ hearts. Some had left son, father, brother, or friend at the insurgents’ mercy ; others had the objects of their dearest affection in the Versailles army which went into action almost daily. The luckiest were they who only trembled for their property. How they crowded round the bulletin boards announcing successes of the Governmental forces ! The side-wall of the church had the privilege of receiving the written news, and there opinions were exchanged. The terrace was naturally the refugees’ rendezvous, and looked like the promenade of a watering-place on some of the warm spring evenings when the air was balmy and the verdure fresh. Fashionable cavaliers saluted the ladies who sat in circles the same as in the Tuilleries gardens, and at times troops of riders trotted by so well-equipped as not to have disgraced the Bois de Boulogne before the war ravaged it.

On a broiling Sunday, towards the middle of May, the flower of society quite fought for chairs before the Henry V. Pavilion and on the park lawn. Opera-glasses were levelled at the horizon where puffs of cannon smoke

appeared from time to time, and remarks were passed on the splendid aim of the formidable Montretout battery which had shaken the old château overnight with its roar. The elegant crowd did not reach beyond the cross road, at the forest entrance where only melancholy and isolated groups leaning over the stone balustrade were to be met with. It was the haunt of the afflicted who shunned the careless throng noisily buzzing at the other end of the broad walk. On a rustic bench under the verdant canopy, Renée de Saint-Senier was seated, gazing at Paris. She was paler than usual and dressed in mourning. An open book in her lap testified that she had been trying to read, and that her eyes had turned away against her will. Her formerly gentle countenance wore a cold, firm expression, and grief had left a deep impress on her pure lineaments. Standing before his mistress, the faithful Landreau showed himself also much changed. His hair had turned white, his wrinkles were deeper, and his broad back arched. He had shaven off his beard and moustache, and wore black livery instead of a uniform. The soldier had resumed service in the Saint-Senier family, and in his eyes could be read his determination to defend the young lady as he had Lieutenant Roger.

"Mademoiselle," he said, timidly, "the evenings draw in so chilly—had you not better go indoors?"

"Nothing, nothing yet?" murmured Renée, without answering him.

"Alas, no," sighed Landreau. "I have only just come from the post-office and I am sure there's no letter, for I can warrant that the clerks know me now. As soon as they see me coming, they shake their heads to signify there's nothing."

"Two months! I have been waiting two months," moaned the lady bitterly.

"But, mademoiselle, you must not mope like that; you will fall ill. Now I don't see anything out of the common in our receiving no news; for the last three days no post has come out of the city."

His hearer sadly shook her head, and poor Landreau could not persist, feeling how powerless were stock consolations to calm his lady's woe.

"If you'd allow me, mademoiselle, I'd go and see," he resumed, pointing to Montmartre's dark mound on the horizon.

"You have already dared quite enough, old friend," responded she.

"Tut, were that all," cried the brave keeper, "I should have been off long ago without any warning. But I shall not leave you so long as you are in this cursed country and not safe at home. For if those rascally Parisians were to make a sortie as far as this, who would defend you?"

Renée shook her head in indifference, clearly expressing what a burden her life was.

"Oh, mademoiselle, do not despair thus," went on the old servitor. "There's something in my heart tells me that M. Roger is alive and that we shall soon see him."

A dreadful detonation drowned his words. Mont-Valérien and Montretout had fired all their batteries off at once.

"Do you hear that, mademoiselle?" cried Landreau; "those discharges mean for sure that the beginning of the end has come."

"Heaven grant it," said Renée in an undertone.

"Once the regulars take the town, you will let me go there, eh? Then I shall not be worried about you, and I answer for my hunting up the lieutenant."

"Were he still living, he would have written to me. On the very evening of his arrival in the accursed city, he did not lose an hour in informing me

of it, and the silence following his first and only letter can only be explained by a mishap."

"But those ruffians may have merely put him in prison, as was done with me for over a month. No, no, mademoiselle, God is too good to allow such a misfortune!"

"Yet God has cruelly smitten our house," said the girl in a broken voice; "my brother first, then my second mother, and now—"

"That was the full measure, mademoiselle; believe me, you will not have more to suffer."

"It seems that fate pursues all those attached to us; yes, even to the poor girl who devoted herself to save Roger, and who has disappeared!"

"Oh, there's no need to worry about her; she is as keen and clever as she is good, and if she has gone, it is for a good purpose. It's my belief that we shall see her turn up all right. Why, who knows but she may bring us news of the lieutenant. Didn't she go among the Prussians last winter to help him escape?"

Renée was not hearkening, lost as she was in gloomy reverie.

"There's a mystery in that girl's life," she observed after a long silence.

"I don't dispute that," said the old attendant. "She was never born in a fair booth, and I believe that Pilevert could tell us a fine tale if he liked."

"He has gone away, too," sighed Renée.

"That was no loss, mademoiselle! I have always thought he kidnapped that child from her parents."

"I have had the same idea sometimes, and wanted to question Régine, but she would never trust me with the secret of her birth. Maybe she never knew."

"Well, I questioned the showman, but drew nothing from him. If I ever come across him again, I will have it out."

Day was fading and already the flashes of the artillery were becoming visible. Renée rose and slowly crossed the terrace to lean on the parapet over the shelving mound and contemplate the dark and grandiose picture of that horizon illumined with the lightning, which the god of civil war was hurling about. Landreau respected her grief and spoke no more. Standing behind her, he also looked on the city which had seized his master. He was more uneasy than he wished to appear, and he dropped his assurance when Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier was not looking at him. His rueful reflections were interrupted by the rattle of wheels and the jingle of bells on a horse coming up at a smart trot.

XXXI.

RENÉE paid no heed to what was passing on the terrace, her attention being wholly concentrated on Paris. So Landreau alone turned at the sound of the vehicle rolling out of one of the forest side roads upon the esplanade. It was a tilted country cart, on two wheels, and drawn by a sorry nag. The driver, seated in the front, was urging the poor beast into that lively pace which the most fatigued jades reserve for the last mile to the stable. So paltry a turn-out did not particularly interest Landreau, who would have let it go by, but, on coming abreast of him, the vehicle stopped, and the driver, sticking his head out, accosted him thus:

"I say, neighbour, what's my road to the Grand Vainqueur Inn?"

The fellow's husky voice struck Landreau more than the inquiry itself. He seemed vaguely to have heard it before. To dispel his doubts, he went up and stationed himself face to face with the man who stooped down at the same instant.

"What, is it you?"

"Trumpets of Jericho, it's the old keeper!"

Pilevert and Landreau had simultaneously recognised each other.

"Where do you come from?" queried the old servant.

"From Poissy, and elsewhere," said the mountebank, "and I call it deuced lucky to meet you for I was after you."

"After me!" cried Landreau, rather surprised, as he had not had time to become a bosom friend of the Hercules.

"I mean the young lady—your lady, don't you know—"

"Not so loud," said the keeper. "There she is, and she must not have any shock, being low with mourning."

"Eh! is that her on the balcony, yonder?" asked Pilevert in a lower voice.

"Yes; I'll break it to her gently."

"Never you mind. A man who can juggle with an egg and a cannon ball can do anything delicately, I presume. Just you hold Cocotte a minute."

Landreau did as he was asked, though the request was somewhat superfluous, as the sorry steed showed no symptoms of running away, and down jumped the strong man. During this brief dialogue, Renée had not emerged out of her sad reverie. Pilevert went up to her with a guarded tread, politely smoothing his hair and beard with a sweep of his hand; he had removed his hat and he hummed and hawed to give himself a countenance.

"I am afraid madame does not remember me," he faltered, "of course, when I say madame, I mean, mademoiselle."

Renée had not recognised him, and for two reasons: she had seen very little of him since the scene at the asylum, and he had greatly modified his attire. He almost resembled a rural villa proprietor in his broad brimmed hat, long brown full skirted coat and nankeen trousers.

"Oh, you know," he proceeded, "I'm the man you saw—at Montmartre with your cousin, on the day when we saved you."

Renée's face suddenly brightened.

"I remember you, perfectly, sir," she said, offering her hand, "and I have not forgotten the service you rendered me."

"Don't mention it! How's Monsieur Roger getting on?" he inquired to show his easy grace.

She turned pale, and caught at the balustrade, so as not to fall, Pilevert having unwittingly touched the unhealed wound.

"My cousin went back to town after you left me," she said with an effort, "and I have not seen him since."

"A thousand trumpets!" exclaimed the Hercules, "has he again fallen into the grip of those 'Serpenteau' rascals. They've done quite enough, and I'll get 'em shot, for the Versailles troops have entered Paris, and—"

"Are you speaking the truth?" inquired Renée, with emotion.

"Faith, I met a man in the wood who told me so, and he looked like a Communist on the slope."

Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier seemed agitated beyond power of speech or motion.

"And my little Régine, have you left her at home?" asked the showman timidly.

"Régine also went away," said Renée.

"Went away!" repeated Pilevert, "without writing to me about it. Come, this is too bad, and hang me if I don't speak out."

The young lady gazed on him in astonishment. Her mind was so absorbed in the news of the troops entering Paris that she gave but little attention to a topic which would have deeply interested her at another time. Régine's name in the showman's mouth ranked below Roger's.

"What do you say," she asked, without trying to conceal her emotion, "about M. de Saint-Senier's political enemies? do you believe them capable of—"

"Any mortal thing," answered Pilevert bluntly, "even of killing my poor little Régine, and I am afraid she has gone to Paris again to take a hand in your cousin's affairs."

His tone wounded Régine.

"What makes you believe that?" she asked with a loftiness which immediately reminded the showman of the laws of politeness.

"Why, look here, mademoiselle," he said sulkily, "I don't want to offend you, but I am right down vexed at your letting the girl go away."

"I deplore her departure as much as you, but it did not depend on me to stop her. She left the château one night without warning; I had a search made all round about, but no one could give any news of her."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but was this before or after your cousin went up to Paris?"

"On the eve of his quitting Saint-Senier."

"Just so," growled Pilevert.

"Pray explain yourself," commanded the lady.

"By all the trumpets of Jericho, it's plain enough: she is so fond of him. Now you know it."

This outspokenness struck Renée to the heart. She had already thought that Régine's actions were inspired by a warmer feeling than devotion, but she had always put the suspicion aloof. It was repugnant to her to admit the rivalry of the courageous girl who had saved Roger, and the rough showman's plain speech offended her even as an insult. But at the same time her distrust as a loving woman awoke in spite of herself.

"I wish to know this girl's story," she said anxiously.

"I don't ask anything better than to tell you all about it, and I would have done so before now, only you brought up those 'Serpenteau' fellows between."

"I am listening to you now."

"It'll take some time, and Cocotte wants her feed."

"Speak, I tell you!" exclaimed Renée with a firmness which silenced his objections.

"Well, I can cut it short," muttered the showman. "I must tell you, mademoiselle, that in the pursuit of my profession, I have travelled all over the world. Some fifteen months ago, I came back from California, where I had piled up enough gold dust to buy a van and a horse, and I did the southern fairs with a great fool of a fellow, named Aleindor, whom I picked up in the streets of Toulouse."

Renée had a deal of trouble to hide her impatience, and Pilevert, perceiving that, went to the point at once.

"Well, one day, I mean, afternoon, on the road from Bazas to Bordeaux,

on the open common, I spied a child sitting and weeping on a ditch side. I get me down, I ask her what's she's ailing with ; no answer ; but she makes me a sign that she can't hear, and that she's a dumb to boot. I show her the van as much as to say, 'This is the bandit's home,' meaning she was welcome to join the company. She skipped in without any pressure, and off we go. Then she hauled out a slate and set to writing a lot of pretty words : how she was all alone in the world, and could tell fortunes and would do so, if I liked, to amuse the public in my show, on condition I kept her and never bothered her about her parents."

"Strange," said Renée.

"It appeared so to me, but I just did want a lady performer to lend some variety to the entertainment, and she suited me. In short, I engaged her on her own special terms, and it looked well in the bills, and was no bad spec. Three days afterwards, she began her trickery with the cards and reading the future in country fellows' hands, and then up went the takings to double ! And so genteel she was ! so knowing ! as lofty as an eagle ! and such an education ! you ought to know that !"

"But her family ?" quickly asked the lady.

"There's no telling you a word on that point. Whenever I wrote about that on her slate, she would snatch away the pencil and put on her things to go and leave me then and there."

"What ! for a whole year she travelled with you, and you didn't discover anything about her past life ?" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier. "You do not know who she is, or whence she came ?"

"I rather believe I got a clue to it yesterday," replied Pilevert mysteriously.

XXXII.

"MAKE yourself clearer," said Renée, somewhat sternly.

Pilevert did not hasten to respond ; it seemed as if he regretted having said so much.

"Goodness me, mademoiselle," he replied, hesitating, "when I talked about a clue to Régine's story, I did not mean I was sure about it."

"But what reasons have you to speak as you do ?"

"Black and white."

"I do not understand you."

"I found some papers about her."

"Papers !"

"Yes ; and something better, too."

His hearer's astonishment was at the climax. She even wondered if the mountebank was not wandering, for his incoherent sentences imparted nothing precise to her upon this subject now so interesting, since allusion had been made to the show-girl's affection for Saint-Senier. Moreover, she felt a dislike to prolonging so familiar a conversation in a public place. The faithful Landreau's glances expressed the same sentiment. A slave to duty, even out of the army, the keeper had not left Cocotte, but he coughed meaningly. Night was falling and the loungers were leaving the walk. Two or three gendarmes, in long over-coats, and white-banded caps, moved about with a side-glance at the cart in the road. In these critical days, when everything unusual was suspicious, a man of Pilevert's style was bound to attract attention when speaking with a lady. Simple as was Renée's attire, no one could mistake her social position,

"Sir," said she, with a dignity which put the showman back in his proper place, "if you have anything to tell me, I will receive you this evening at 97 Rue de Noailles."

The abashed Pilevert drew back two paces, made an extremely low bow, quite in the traditional style of the fair booths, and muttered with embarrassment :

"Faith, I ask nothing better, because of Cocotte—not worth Bradamante, mind you, but still a fairish beast—and when I have seen her eat her feed at the Grand Vainqueur, I shall be more at my ease to spin the yarn."

The name of the inn reached Landreau's ears and he hastened to have his say.

"Turn when you are outside the park gates," he said, "and take the Rue de Pontoise to the Place de l'Eglise where anybody will tell you the rest."

"Thanks, old fellow," said Pilevert, clambering into his chariot. "I shall be round to your house before the hour's over."

He gave a smart slash of the whip to his mare which trotted off and the equipage disappeared under the trees. Landreau, coming up to his mistress, was startled by the expression of her features, from which the sad cloud had been chased away by singular animation.

"Let us go home," she quickly said.

The keeper had enough tact to understand that any remark would be unreasonable and all questions impertinent. So he silently followed his mistress among the trees. The Rue de Noailles almost touches the park and they arrived in a few minutes at the little house which Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier had taken ; one of those modern equestrian buildings built in the environs of Paris as summer abodes. Two storeys, miniature "English garden," with a glass house at the end, a lonely street outside, such were the main characteristics of the place. When Renée made up her mind to leave home for the neighbourhood of Paris, she brought only the old serving-man and one woman. She had hardly more than returned from her promenade, so unusually curtailed on this occasion, than she went into the greenhouse where she habitually finished the evening. Landreau received the order to usher in the showman as soon as he came, and he had the good taste not to keep the lady waiting. The hour he had set apart for his and Cocotte's refraction had not elapsed before he was at the house in the Rue de Noailles. He made his entry into the greenhouse with a mysterious bearing in keeping with the wonderful overcoat in which he had thought fit to attire himself; its dim colour and its folds hid an object he carried warily under one arm. After many bows, Master Antoine opened his strange garment and placed on the lady's work-table a long casket.

"In there is Régine's story," he said curtly.

His hostess gazed stupefied on the strange piece of evidence produced; it was a carobawood box, with chiselled steel corner-guards. It had been badly treated, by time or damp. The clasps were rusty and the hinges half-eaten away. The lock had been forced open, for Pilevert merely had to lift up the lid.

"Look and read, mademoiselle," said the Hercules, imposingly.

Under any other circumstances, Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier would have asked some questions before examining the contents of the box, but her overpowering emotion would not let her hesitate. She bent over the casket and her trembling hand took out an oval framed miniature.

"'Tis she!" ejaculated Renée,

"Aha ! so you recognised her straight off," said Pilevert. "I couldn't doubt it myself even before I looked at the documents."

Indeed the portrait was that of a little girl of eight or ten, whose infantile features reminded any one who knew Régine, of hers. The closer one looked, the less doubt was possible. The eyes particularly wore an expression about which one could not be deceived. Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier remained mute and motionless, as if dreading to dive more deeply into the mystery.

"Read, read ! you'll see better below," said the strong man, pointing to some papers at the bottom of the box.

She took one sheet and unfolded it unsteadily ; it was a letter on coarse paper yellowed by time.

"'Régine, my darling child!'" began the lieutenant's betrothed in a moved voice.

"Ha ! did I not tell you it was about my little girl?" said Pilevert.

Renée continued in these terms :

"'You are still a child, yet I am sure you have not forgotten your father. I did not dream that I should never see you again on that day when I pressed you to my heart at Bordeaux before sailing away to Mexico. Heaven has otherwise decided. I am in the hands of the enemies of France who have doomed me to death and I shall fall under their bullets in the morning, sending you my latest thought. Your poor mother lost her life in giving you yours, and now you will be alone in the world. Hence I must speak to you as though you had a woman's sense. The ladies with whom I trusted you on my departure, are paid for three years' care of you. I hope they will then place you as governess in some respectable family if they cannot keep you as an assistant teacher in their boarding-school. I had dreamed of another life for you, but the fatality pursuing our race has not lost its force. Your grandfather died a victim to the civil war which devastated our poor country some years before your birth. I had a brother whom I had hoped would help me to restore the fortune of our house. But political passion has made him my bitterest enemy, and if ever this misguided Charles dares to claim any right over you, repulse with horror the guardianship of a man who has dishonoured our name. One hope remains to me as to your future, contained in the paper I enclose in this same letter ; it is the will of my best friend Edmond de Luot who, on embarking for California, left you his fortune. He was your playmate when you were a tiny child, you may remember how you pulled his long moustache. Forgive me recalling such trivialities, my child, when there remains such little time to tell you that your father loves you dearly and his last thought is for you. Farewell, Régine ! my heart is broken and I have but the strength to say : Remember that you are the daughter of

"'GEORGE DE NOIRVAL.'"

Renée let fall the letter without power to pronounce a word ; her eyes were full of tears and her lips trembled.

"Go on, go on ! there are some more papers underneath," said the showman, in nowise sharing her emotion.

She hesitated an instant, but the interest urging her to penetrate the mystery was too powerful for her to stop. She opened and successively perused a birth certificate in the name of Régine Louise Gabrielle de Noirval and the will of a Count de Luot who had named her as his sole legatee. Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier suspected some dark plot to rob the poor orphan ; but she of course could not link this sad story to the

events which had overwhelmed her during the year. All the names she read were unknown to her.

"Noirval!" repeated she thoughtfully, "I never met anybody of the name."

"No more did I," grumbled Filevert, "but I'm blessed if it ain't awfully like Valnoir."

XXXIII.

Two days after the Sunday evening which Renée de Saint-Senier had spent amid so much emotion, the Buttes Montmartre were the scene of much more dramatic scenes. The hill on which the insurrection had broken out had become its last stronghold. It was eleven in the morning, and from dawn the soldiers of the good cause had marched up to encompass the federals' lair, one by one capturing the approaches to the height. Firing resounded on the outer boulevard, and the horrid crash of the mitrailleuses served as an accompaniment to the sharp hail of shots raining on the house-fronts. The engagement was very keen on the Place Blanche and the Place Pigalle, where the odious Communists still held their paving-stone barricades. The red flag even floated upon Dr. Molinhard's asylum, where the insurgents had set up their headquarters. It was a marvellously well-chosen resisting point. Protected on all sides by steep cuttings in the bluff height, surrounded by numerous cannon, which hurled destructive shells on museums and monuments, the Villa des Buttes seemed impregnable. Since the 18th of March it had completely changed in aspect. Sick and wounded were cleared out; the infirmary became a barracks, and the large yard an arsenal for munitions. Dr. Molinhard had put on the costume of the federal surgeons, and devoted the daytime to amputations, and the nights to attending his prisoners, for he was as busy as a warden as a practitioner. Mother Ponisse had of course naturally resumed her old functions as canteen-keeper, and the federals drank so heartily that she was on the road to accumulating a fortune. On this day, the horrible harpy and her master could hardly keep apace with the demands made upon them, so numerous indeed were the drunks and wounded men flocking up to the Buttes. So they little heeded the interior of the villa, of which they had carefully locked all the doors. In the remotest corner of this makeshift gaol, in the sorry garden where Renée had suffered so much, Roger de Saint-Senier and Podensac were standing and listening to the cannonade.

"The fire's slackening," remarked the Gascon.

"A bad sign," said the other, shaking his head.

"That depends," returned Podensac quickly; "you know they cease firing for a bayonet charge."

"Then we should hear the charge sounded."

"Not so surely, with the wind away from us. Hark! there's some volley-firing near by La Chapelle."

"Strange! Can the regulars be retreating?"

"I rather believe they're making a flank movement," said the captain, who claimed a knowledge of strategy; "if the soldiers had any sense, they would get round and take Montmartre from the nor'-east."

"But when we were brought here, I fancied I saw the northern slope armed with great guns like the city hill-side."

"Thunder!" roared Podensac, always galled by the reminder of how he had been arrested; "only to think if that stupid clown had not brought

us round here to this quack's prison, we should have been sent to the Cherche-Midi gaol, and should be free now."

"I rather believe that we should have been shot in that case," said Saint-Senier.

"How do you know that we shall not be served so now?" grumbled the captain. "If ever I lay hold of him and the quack, I will give them such a trouncing," he added, shaking his fist at the absent Alcindor.

"I am ready to die," said Roger, "but I wish I had a weapon to die with in my grip."

"So do I! And there's nothing—not even a stick or a stone."

"Hark!" said the lieutenant, grasping his friend's arm.

There was no mistaking this time. The hurried bugle-calls rang afar, and the firing recommenced with unheard-of violence.

"It's an assault! they are charging up the hill at the double quick! Long live the line!"

A nearer clamour drowned their joyous cheers. Confused shouts and hasty footsteps sounded within the prison enclosure.

"They're coming to deliver us," said Roger.

"To murder us," said Podensac.

They had proceeded together to the parlour-door, where, very pale but resolute, they courageously abided their fate, whether death or deliverance was heralded by the tumult. It was the mealy face of Molinchard which first appeared on the garden threshold. Behind him some half-a-dozen insurgents, with their hair flowing, their faces powder-blackened, and their clothes in shreds. They had their guns in hand, and shouted all together, so that little could be distinguished save their dreadful oaths.

"What do you want?" demanded Podensac, clenching his fists.

"Come, citizens, come quick!" gasped Molinchard, choking with excitement.

"Where do you want to take us?" queried Saint-Senier, with his eyes blazing at the doctor.

"You'll not be hurt," the latter hastened to add, "but I beg of you to come. There's not a minute to be lost."

The prisoners conferred in looks, and detected a mutual resolve to face the emergency.

"Let us go," said Podensac, dashing the trembling surgeon aside with a sweep of his hand.

Roger, on his side, now joined to the group, which proceeded through the long passage communicating between the detached house and the main buildings, and leading straight to the villa gateway. The appearance of the two friends was loudly acclaimed.

"Step forward, citizens," said the doctor, who had followed them.

They crossed the threshold arm-in-arm, and a strange spectacle awaited them below the steps. A hundred armed Communists filled the narrow esplanade under the high asylum walls. In a corner lay some wounded men, to whom their comrades paid no attention whatever. In the middle of the throng, a fellow, all lace and feathers, awkwardly bestrode a tall grey horse. In the first row, two wild-looking men were animatedly gesticulating, one with a red rag at the end of a pole, the other with a long cavalry sword. They were both orators and leaders of the band, for, as soon as the prisoners appeared, the swordsman imposed silence on the brawlers, whilst the flag-bearer spoke as follows:

"You aristocrats, you'd better answer me without any nonsense. The

Versaillais are coming up the Rue Lepic, so there's no time for beating about the bush. You have been in the army. At least, so I am told," the fellow added.

"I commanded the sharpshooters of the Rue Maubuée," answered Podensac, promptly, "and my comrade was a lieutenant in the mobile guard, 3rd battalion of—"

"That's all the same to me," continued the spokesman. "As long as you are officers, that's good enough for us. You must know all about soldiering?"

"Yes, French soldiering!" retorted Roger, proudly, for he began to see how the wind blew.

"That's good! to-day you shall command the fire-eaters of the Commune."

"Never!" shouted the prisoners together.

"We are over a hundred stout fellows, but we don't know anything at all about *straddlegy* as that idiot upon the horse there calls it, and we must have proper men to organise the defence of the height."

"Go and find them," said Podensac calmly.

"It's take it or leave it," returned the rascal; "if you won't lead us, I'll pretty soon shove you against this wall and pepper you!"

"Accept, citizens, accept," cried the plumed hero perched on the horse; "the art of defence is easy and I'll help you with my advice if you get non-plussed."

"That imbecile Alcindor again," muttered the captain, recognizing the former pupil of old Pilevert under the dazzling plumage.

Saint-Senier took a step forward and, looking the federal ringleader full in the eyes, he said steadily:

"Shoot away! but you won't make turncoats of us."

Podensac did not add a word to this heroic refusal, but grasped his friend's hand and squeezed it.

"Oh, that's how you take it, is it?" roared the insurgent, shaking his sabre, "then you shall have it hot, and when the others come here they'll find your carcasses with a dozen bullets in them."

XXXIV.

THE friends looked at one another, and Roger took Podensac's arm.

"We are ready," said he, advancing on to the steps, "where shall we stand to die?"

The federal forces were so little accustomed to meet with military or political stoicism, that this courageous reply somewhat impressed those who heard it.

"He's a plucky 'chap' anyhow," said the man with the long sword.

His flag-bearing comrade appeared rather puzzled as well. Both evidently would have preferred the assistance of the officers, voluntary or otherwise, to the necessity of shooting them. Alcindor fully shared their opinion and thought it not beneath his dignity to make a last appeal. Urging his steed through the company he came up to the steps.

"Citizens," said he, "I do not wish to influence you, yet I may remind you that on the memorable day of the 18th March, I saved your life. Without my intervention, you would have fallen two months ago

beneath the bullets of the people who this day, by my voice, claim your support as a service in return."

This insinuating speech was specially addressed to Podensac, who listened with much attention, and wavered about replying. Then nudging Roger to warn him, he snapped his fingers to inform the rebels that he cared very little for the whole matter and, coming to the edge of the steps, he called out:

"I'm willing!"

"That's the style!" said the spokesmen of the insurgents.

"Three cheers for the general!" shouted they all, though they would have slaughtered him a minute before.

"On one condition," added Podensac.

"Anything you like!" said the chorus.

"My comrade is to be free to go."

This proposition was not warmly received.

"No, no! he would betray us to the Versaillais," cried the majority.

A few dissenting voices pleaded for an acceptance of the bargain, but they were overpowered in the uproar. Roger turned pale on hearing Podensac so generously offer to sacrifice himself for him. He was wavering between the natural desire to escape certain death and the remorse of owing life to such a transaction. The man with the sword undertook to cut the gordian knot.

"We can't let the officer elope," he said curtly, "but he sha'n't be hurt, and he may smoke his pipe quietly whilst we are having our brains knocked out. One, two, three, is that agreed?"

"Yes it's agreed," the captain hastened to respond, so as not to leave Saint-Senier any time to reflect.

"Now, then, boys, a couple of volunteers to guard the swell," cried the ringleader.

A dozen rebels presented themselves immediately for this far from dangerous task, and their summoner only had the embarrassment of choice. While all this was proceeding, the Gascon whispered in the lieutenant's ear :

"Let me be; I undertake to get us both clear." And as Roger stood silent, he said aloud : "And now, my boys, if you want me to command you, you must obey me like soldiers."

"We will!"

"The destiny of the people is in your hands," said Alcindor pompously from the height of his horse.

"Destiny of your grandmother!" rejoined Podensac. "But, while I am saving the people, just take my comrade over to the foot of that low wall there and stand guard over him. You see, you chatteringers, that I am playing you fair," he proceeded, staring at his new followers.

He had long enough led the dare devils of the Rue Maubuée to know how to speak to the point and his success was complete. Saint-Senier's keepers immediately conducted him to the indicated spot, whilst the new generalissimo conferred with his two marshals on the strategetic instructions to be issued. The battlefield was a northerly sloping ground lying before the villa; a hundred paces from the house steps, the narrow walk was cut by a deep trench and protected by a stone barricade. Against this Roger was now stationed, his head just overtopping it. On the other hand the asylum buildings masked the approaches from Paris. A road, greatly out of repair, ran along the front and led to the right up to the

La Galette battery and to the left to the entrenchments of the Solferino Tower.

"My lads," said Podensac, after a brief conference, "that's where you must keep on the lookout."

The fusillade seemed to approach. The Versailles forces were vigorously attacking the barricades on the western declivity of Montmartre and making progress, although the resistance was fierce, judging by the firing. Indeed everything indicated that the Communists still held the lower streets, neither wounded men nor fugitives came up to the plateau, and the absence of these forerunners of retreat encouraged the desperate crew above. Podensac had his plan quite ready. He did not doubt the ultimate success of the army, and he had no intention of fighting against it. To betray the federals by leading them into a trap, or even letting them be caught in one, was not to his taste however. He decided on a medium course, which consisted in so stationing the men on the plateau that they could escape when the rush came. He did not trouble about himself, and was resigned beforehand to the consequences of his position.

"Bah!" he thought, as he went at the head of his new army to the threatened points, "I shall be deucedly unlucky if I catch a friendly bullet, no doubt when the break up commences I shall manage to slip away with my friend."

Duly acting upon this reasoning, the commander had placed Saint-Senier at the end of the ridge, wishing to find him handy at the critical instant when they would have to fly along the steep height. As he saw him, tranquilly leaning against the wall with folded arms between the two sentries, he gave him a glance to keep him upon the alert. However the man with the sabre gave murderous instructions to his subordinates.

"If the swell budges, blow out his brains and mighty quick too!"

This ferocious order did not much frighten Podensac who knew that the federals would lose their senses when they saw the regulars arrive, and would only think of saving themselves. So he abstained from intervening. The army of which he had become the general despite himself obeyed him with exemplary docility, for danger conduces to obedience even among those who hate restraint. The man with the sword and the colour-bearer had shown plenty of discipline as lieutenants.

The little party disappeared around the villa buildings. Podensac himself chose the post of defending the houses three hundred paces off near the Galette mill, a place presenting all that was necessary so as not to expose him too much and to let him escape in time. Thus Saint-Senier remained with the squalid rogues left in charge of him and the prudent Alcindor, who had not cared to follow the warriors.

"Cavalry has no place in street fights," he had said on seeing them march away.

And he had continued to prance about on his gilded saddle, which must have been stolen from some general officer. His stupid face was lit up with a vain glory which rendered him more absurd than ever. He was ostensibly seeking the attitude best becoming a great captain and, by the mere way he puffed out under his frippery, anyone could guess he thought himself Kleber or Marceau. Roger, however, troubled himself little about the mounted clown. Absorbed in his reflections, he did not even look on the grand picture stretching before his eyes. From this standpoint, he could behold the immense horizon of the Saint-Denis plain. Dazzling sunshine gilded the Orgement hills and Montmorency woods.

Nearer, to hand, the Prussian flag waved upon Aubervilliers fort, a sign of foreign invasion, seemingly planted there to render civil war still more shameful. On that side the town seemed tranquil, and from the bastions of the fortifications to the foot of Montmartre, neither smoke nor sound of an engagement could be observed. On the other slope, though, the cannonade was raging, and formidable roars shook the ground every instant. At times it really seemed as if the Buttes were going to be swallowed up in the quarries beneath. It was manifest that the end was drawing nigh and the two watchers began to display uneasiness; their eyes turning in the direction Podensac had taken, they made ready to fly as soon as the least alarm arose. Roger was thinking of Renée, and, by a singular effect of imagination, again he beheld the dense woods and pointed turrets of the old Château of Saint-Senier. He was remembering the day when, for the first time, he had read in his cousin's eyes that his love was shared by her. However his musings were abruptly interrupted by the whistling of a bullet.

XXXV.

THE projectile came within an inch of Roger's head, and no doubt grazed Alcindor's charger, for the pacific beast began caroling most strangely. Horsemanship had not formed part of the performances Alcindor had given in Pilevert's booth; so he was obliged to hold on by the mane, and had not the prisoner been otherwise occupied, he would have roared with laughter at the clown's grotesque contortions. The two guards had no inclinations to laugh however. They exchanged frightened looks and wondered where the missile had come from. Roger himself was astonished that a shot came so far. There was nobody in sight and it was hardly supposed that the bullet had come over the asylum roof.

"It's getting hot," muttered one of the federals at last.

"Let's hook it," said the other.

"But the swell?"

"I'll put a bullet in his head."

"Pooh! let's hold on a bit. There'll be loads of time when our mates come back."

The prisoner had not heard this edifying talk but he divined their intentions without any difficulty.

He was doomed to die and he would not have taken a step to avoid it. However Alcindor, who had recovered his balance, prevailed on his steed to approach Roger and he said, in his usual pedantic tone:

"I can't calculate the trajectory; that bullet must have come from those houses."

He pointed to some houses under the cliff, but Saint-Senier did not trouble to look round.

"I think I had better get down," resumed the clown; "I might be killed so high up, and I ought to preserve myself for the people's cause."

"Very wisely reasoned," said Roger ironically; "and I am sure that your friend the doctor, who is coming yonder, would never pardon you for giving him any work to do."

Indeed Molinchard now showed himself on the steps. He had cunningly made off during the parley preceding Podensac's marching away, perhaps to put some compromising papers in safety or secret, some money, the price of many a misdeed. On hearing of his dear accomplice's arrival, Alcindor

urged forward his horse to go and meet him. He did wrong in not obeying his former impulse. As he executed the movement, he reeled and fell on the horse's neck : then he tried to catch at the reins but missed them and fell heavily to the ground, moaning lamentably :

"Help ! I am a dead man !"

A gush of blood followed his desperate appeal. Forgetting their orders, the federals sprang to help him up and Roger himself ran there. To do Molinehard justice, he also arrived at the same time, and knelt beside his friend who was writhing in the last spasms.

"The bullet went in at the back and came out below the clavicle," mumbled the doctor after examination. "Hopeless case," he added, without caring whether the dying man heard him or not.

But Aleindor already was in no state to understand his words. He tried to speak but blood choked him. Naturally very pale, his face now became earthy ; his eyes turned and his limbs stiffened.

"It is over," said Molinehard, rising to his feet and looking restlessly about him. He also wondered where the shot had come from, and seemed very much disposed to retreat into the house, a shelter from such accidents at least.

"Dash it all, we shall be riddled here like sieves," said one of Roger's warders.

"Devil take me if I stay here any longer," said the other.

"But we must not sneak away without giving 'the tip' to the others who are fighting for us below."

"Send the sawbones."

"A good idea."

"I say, Citizen Cut-and-slash," shouted the first federal to Molinchard, "jump on that knacker and gallop to the Galette mill so as to tell our mates that there's something queer here, and we have hooked it."

"Why," objected the perplexed doctor, "if I get on the horse, I shall get shot also."

"Halloo ! do you want us to go down on our knees to you !" said the other tatterdemalion, cocking his gun.

Molinhard got one foot in the stirrup with postboy haste. Roger remained near Aleindor's remains, with folded arms, and his back to the sentinels

"It's a good chance to send the swell out of the way," said one of the sentries, levelling at him.

What occurred in the next few seconds almost baffles description. Molinchard was just settling himself in the saddle, when he bellowed :

"Here's the enemy ! we are betrayed !" and then he drove in his heels and dashed off.

From the horse he had seen the soldiers scaling the stone wall behind the federals. A call responded to his own on that side, but it was uttered by a woman.

"Roger, beware !"

Saint-Senier heard it and sharply turned. This saved his life, for the shot from the Communist's rifle, aimed at him, went off as he bounded towards the woman, whom he recognized, and the ball did not hit him. A dozen bayonets pierce the murderer ; but his comrade was farther off, and before they could overtake him, he had time to discharge his *chassepot* on the sutler-girl of the regiment, who was the foremost in the charge. She fell into the arms of Saint-Senier, as he ran up to her.

"Régine," he exclaimed, trying to hold her up, but she slipped to the ground, bleeding profusely.

The volunteers of the Seine, who had swept over the platform, soon despatched the girl's slayer, and turned upon the lieutenant, whose presence there was suspicious. Some of the young fellows aimed at him, but a sergeant ran before the guns, shouting : "Not him ! I know him. He's a mobile ! Quite enough good blood shed in our poor little dumb girl being brought down."

The guns were lowered. The officer, who had led this bold dash, was in no mood to let his men catch a chill on the ridge. The thing was to reap the fruits of the turning movement so happily effected, and to take the federals between two fires ; they would be thunderstruck at being attacked behind. The charge was sounded, and away ran the volunteers towards the mill, leaving Roger and the sergeant kneeling alone by Régine.

"It is I, Pierre Bourdier," said the sergeant in an undertone, "I did not expect to find you here."

Saint-Senier never heard him. He was holding the hands of the wounded girl, who was sitting up with her back against the stone wall at the foot of which she had fallen. Over her charming face a livid pallor stole, and her hurried breathing heaved her bosom irregularly. No one could deceive himself as to the severity of her wound. It was deadly, and any breath might be her last.

"Only to think," moaned Bourdier, "that if she'd only listened to me she would have remained in the ambulance below ; but, no ! it's just as if she had foreseen that you would be here."

"That I did," sighed the dying girl, so feebly, that she was scarcely heard.

"She speaks !" ejaculated the sergeant, with a start of surprise akin to terror.

Roger himself had started on hearing her, but he had not the heart to question one who laid down her life for him. All the past rose before him and he had a glimpse, an insight into the depths of a darksome mystery in the life of this girl, so strangely intertwined with his own.

"It's like a miracle !" muttered Bourdier, "but that's no reason why we should not try to save the child. If a doctor were here, we might—"

"Yes, yes, a doctor," repeated Roger.

"Our surgeon is below with yesterday's wounded, but the line must have joined our young fellows by this time and I will find the surgeon and bring him here. In ten minutes I'll be back," called out the sergeant, running away at full speed to the mill.

There the discharge of musketry was furious, and the shrill notes of the clarions sounding the onset rung out over the rumble of the distant cannon. The two dead federals swam on their backs in a pool of blood. A few paces off, the miserable clown's body lay with outstretched arms. A lovely May sunshine illumined the scene of carnage, and the birds, frightened by the musketry, piped pitifully on the asylum roof. Régine made a supreme effort, and drew from her bosom a letter which she gave to the lieutenant.

"Nearer, Roger," she breathed.

He bent over, almost touching her face.

"Nearer, still, nearer," she whispered.

Their lips met.

"Roger ! I loved you !"

And then she breathed her last in a chaste kiss.

XXXVI.

THE last day of the unpatriotic contest dawned. After a night disturbed by the cannonade from the heights of Père-la-Chaise Cemetery, where the defeated revolutionists had taken refuge, the country around Paris woke up under the early beams of the beautiful May sun. Between Maisons-Laffitte and Poissy, on the wooded heights from the Seine to Saint-Germain Forest, nature seemed revived by the magnificent spring aurora. The great trees stretched in fresh verdure over the paths and the tender new leaves softly sifted the rays. The woods seemed to don holiday attire to honour the deliverance of Paris, and earth, after such horrors, sought to show men that all their discord had not left a scar on her fruitful bosom. At the edge of a ditch, on a deserted road, not far from that spot where the fugitive Régine and Roger had met Pierre Bourdier, two wayfarers were reclining on the grass. The younger seemed dead-beat. He was stretched on his side, his head leaning on his arms and his body motionless as with the exhaustion produced by a long painful walk. The other had gathered himself up like a Peruvian mummy, his chin on his knees, his eye and ear on the alert. A mere glance at him showed that a persistent thought overcame physical lassitude, and the scornful glances he bestowed on his companion did not announce much reliance on his help.

"Time to be off," he hoarsely snarled of a sudden. "We ought to have been away an hour ago. Up, up, dash it all! shake yourself together!" he continued; "I don't want the Versailles troops to catch me dawdling about with you."

"Well, go alone," muttered the other without changing his position.

"You will get taken if I act on your advice."

"No matter if I am delivered of your presence and speeches."

"Halloo! you are a nice one to grumble. Had it not been for me, you would have been shot—or at least on the way to Satory plain for execution."

"Better that death than what awaits me," rejoined the wearied man with a groan.

The other laughed.

"Tush," he sneered, "you make me laugh with your despair, and I should really like to know what you want with your ridiculous lamentations. Are you wailing for your princess?"

At this ironical phrase, the prostrate man looked up abruptly.

"I won't have her spoken of," he said sharply.

"Dear me!"

"Yes, I forbid it, and if you do add another word, I shall leave you on the spot."

"Good, good, keep cool! I will respect the noble heiress to the great name of Charmière, but not on account of your bullying. You know as well as I do that we cannot part."

"I know what you mean to say, but money is a mere nothing when life is not worth living, and what is left to me of mine is not worth the trouble to defend it."

"Look here, Valnoir," proceeded the other in a milder voice; "will you listen to me and argue a little without getting wild?"

The former editor of the "Serpenteau" shook his head without answer.

ing. "You have always been excitable, and I am not sorry you are, for your temper gave us a circulation of fifty thousand during two months," said the impassive Taupier with perfect gravity. Under the worn-out clothes he had donned for flight, the humpback looked more hideous than ever, and—whilst the disguise of Valnoir only imperfectly concealed the stylish gentleman—his infernal comrade had the air of an escaped galley-slave. But he had preserved the command over the weak journalist which his consummate rascality ensured him.

"You are out of sorts," he tranquilly pursued, "because we have been beaten. The Reaction has triumphed, as we say, and you seem to believe that all is lost. Well, to tell you the truth, I thought you stronger minded."

"What do you want us to become?" queried Valnoir gloomily.

"Why, my dear fellow, any one would say that you never foresaw the entry of the government forces. Did you by chance credit the bulletins we stuck up every morning to keep the noodles' pluck up?"

Valnoir shrugged his shoulders by way of reply.

"Very well! I see you are more sensible than I imagined. Now, since the smash was sure to come, we were bound to have taken our precautions and lay something by for a rainy day, I have my little hoard in my pocket."

"If you allude to a few thousand francs notes remaining from the profits of the paper, I warn you that I don't care to vegetate miserably on such a pittance in some London or Geneva garret."

"What do you take me for?" rejoined Taupier majestically; "I speak of an important sum."

"What do you mean?" inquired the astonished Valnoir.

"I mean that you must have very little memory if you have already forgotten what brings us to this wood."

"Forgotten, you say? certainly not! I have good reasons to remember the place where you are leading me."

"Oh, that duel? Faith, I thought no more about it, and I advise your doing the same; but the casket, dear friend, is well worth our going after it."

"Yes," said Valnoir, bitterly, "it is to you also that I owe this crime on my conscience—a stolen fortune, the daughter of my own brother robbed, perhaps dead of want by my misconduct. And all without any gain, for you know as well as I—"

"I know a deal you don't," interrupted the humpback; "but before acquainting you with it, I want to answer the charge with which you saddle me."

"I suppose you are not denying that you egged me on to—"

"To claim the guardianship of your niece? Not only I do not deny that, but I glory in it. Let us review the facts. Not three years ago, before you had yet invented the 'Serpenteau,' in the days of 'the Valnoir first manner,' it seems to me you were pretty tightly pinched."

"Well? what are you driving at?"

"Chance," said Taupier, unconcernedly, "chance then revealed to me the death in California of a Count de Luot who had left a million francs to Gabrielle de Noirval, who ought to be in possession of a perfectly regular will. The friend who brought me the agreeable news from the Golden State was charged with finding the heiress, but he did not know which way to turn. But I intimately knew the person named Charles de Valnoir and

his convection with the young lady, and I set on the search, and I finally discovered her in a Bordeaux boarding school."

"Yes, and managed matters so skilfully that the child fled away in fright one fine morning, and has never been heard of since."

"If anybody frightened her, it was not I, for she never saw me, going away as she did the eve of my presenting myself at her school. It appears that her uncle, whom she did not know better than me, inspired her with little confidence, and that she preferred to take to the woods and waters rather than have him for guardian."

"Once again," said the irritated Valnoir, "I repeat that I know this tale only too well. You got me to hand you the casket containing the will and other documents, and when the siegc came, you came here with the bright idea of burying it under a tree."

"And I do not repent it."

"It's plain that you wrote romances before you went into politics. Your splendid invention might do in a novel, but I do not at all see what good it has done us."

"Don't you?" sneered Taupier.

"To begin with, nothing proves that we shall find the box where we put it. For six months the forest has been occupied by the Prussians."

"Who are very keen in finding hidden wine in a cellar, but not wont to lose their time in hunting about a wood."

"Granted! I'll admit that the deposit has not been removed; that we will not be arrested before reaching the Chêne-Capitaine; and that we shall unearth the precious casket. But what shall we gain by it all?"

"You shall see."

"Do you imagine by chance that on merely showing that will the fortune of this De Luot, which belongs to my niece, will be handed over to me? You probably forget that inheritance comes from the dead alone, and the chances are that the niece will outlive her uncle."

"The youngest often go first," observed Taupier, sententiously.

"Besides, were she dead a hundred times over, as long as I have no proof of her death, I shall be no better off."

"That's true. I know the law as well as you."

"Then what have you been aiming at this hour as to the fortune in the box?"

"I never said in the box; I said in my pocket."

"I do not understand."

"You will soon. How is the decease of a person from whom one inherits proved?"

"By producing the death certificate, of course."

"So that as Mademoiselle Gabrielle de Noirval, so named in the birth certificate enclosed in the casket, has no other kinsman but you, you will necessarily receive her property if you possess a regular extract from the registry book of deaths recording her demise?"

"No doubt," said Valnoir, showing his surprise, and wondering whither this interminable circumlocution tended.

"Very well," resumed Taupier; "then I hasten to hail a millionaire in you."

"Do drop your silly jokes."

"I do not joke, for here is the death certificate," said the humpback, slapping his pocket.

XXXVII.

VALNOIR rose as sharply as if he had heard the trumpet of a cavalry squadron in pursuit of him.

" You have the certificate of my niece's death ? " he repeated in the most profound stupefaction.

" I have, and all in order, I assure you."

" Give, give it me," said Valnoir, eagerly.

" Deuce take it ! you are in a hurry ? But it strikes me that, before asking me for the proof of the decease, it would be better if you asked about your niece's life and how I found her."

" You are right," said Valnoir, tartly, " and you remind me very apropos that my brother's child disappeared, and that I should have heard of your meeting her, dead or alive, whenever it happened."

" You believe I have concocted this story ? "

" Entirely."

" My dear boy, you do too much honour to my imagination, for not only have I found her, but you know her as well as I do."

" Will you cease talking in enigmas ? "

" The enigma is not difficult, and I am going to give you a clue. I daresay you have not forgotten the pretty girl who performed as a witch in Pilevert's caravan, and whom we met round about here on the morning of your celebrated duel ? "

" Who ? Régine ? "

" The same, my dear fellow. Well, all the tall talk about the voice of nature is gammon, for, on seeing her in her rope-dancer's costume, you never guessed that you were gazing on the sole heiress of your illustrious name."

" Pooh ! you are mad ! my niece was named Gabrielle."

" At school—yes. But on her birth certificate, which we shall find in the box, she is denominated, as they say in the law courts, Régine Louise Gabrielle."

" A simple coincidence ! My brother's child was not a dumb girl, whereas this fortune-teller—"

" Played the part as well as Fenella in 'Masaniello,' but she could speak if she liked, and speak she did before she died."

" Theu she is dead?" faltered Valnoir, aghast.

" I told you I had her death certificate in my pouch."

" Come, Taupier, speak plainly, I entreat you," cried the unfortunate editor, taking his head between his hands.

" I will take pity on you," said the humpback, " for I see that you are not in a fit state to reason, and I'll tell you the whole story."

" I am waiting for it."

" Learn then, my friend, that last Tuesday, whilst you were busy buckling the fair Rose de Charmière's trunks, in her rooms on the Place de la Madeleine, I was covering myself with glory on the Buttes Montmartre."

Valnoir curled his lip in scorn and impatience.

" You need not believe in my exploits, unless you like," said Taupier, without blenching ; " but you can allow that I may have been at Molin-chard's when the Versaillais stormed the heights."

" Hidden in the cellar—it is possible."

"There or elsewhere, no matter. Anyhow they did not catch me, and they even treated me with much respect, for they took me for an ambulance attendant, and I helped friend Molinchard to look after the wounded of both parties."

"That is just like you both."

"Whilst I was bungling with the bandages, there was carried into my hall a sutler-girl who was past remedy—for she had received a shot in the breast at close range, but I had no difficulty in recognising her as the former pupil of our friend the fighting editor."

"Incredible!" muttered Valnoir.

"Perhaps so, but true. You may readily believe that I did not lose my time in weeping over the hopeless case. As soon as the row was over, I took it upon myself to prove the identity of the dead, and in the girl's pockets I found papers that left no doubt."

"As to her name?"

"Yes, her name, and her father's; all was there—even a duplicate of the birth record we have in the casket."

"Go on," said Valnoir, quivering.

"Furnished with these authentic documents, and two volunteer witnesses, I went to the mairie of the 18th Arrondissement and had the death of Régine Louise Gabrielle de Noirval inserted on the registry."

Valnoir was too agitated to speak.

"I, furthermore, took the precaution to take a copy of the said entry," went on Taupier, tranquilly.

"Have you got it?"

"I have already told you so."

"Then I do inherit," exclaimed Valnoir.

"You mean, we do," rectified the humpback.

"What's that? we?" repeated Valnoir. "Do you think you are of my family?"

"I know I haven't the honour," said Taupier; "my father was only a petty grocer at Montronge; but he never changed his name."

"Nor mine his," returned the editor, quickly; "if I altered mine for a pseudonym, I am none the less Charles de Noirval, sole inheritor of my niece."

"Reasoned properly, but how are you going to claim her property without producing the proof of her decease?"

"I will procure a copy."

"If you yourself go to the Montmartre town-hall for it, you are sure to get arrested."

"I can write from London or Geneva."

"What guarantee have you that England or Switzerland will not grant extradition? Foreigners are rather prejudiced against the Commune, and, for my part, I shall not trust the hospitality of your neighbours."

Valnoir hung his head without answering, the humpback's objection seeming very forcible to him. He did not foresee that assassins and incendiaries would be given the right of refuge, and would return to occupy high official posts under government later on.

"Between ourselves, my dear friend, I believe my plan is better than yours," proceeded the humpback.

"What plan?"

"A very simple one: the Count de Luot's fortune is deposited in cash at the French Consulate at San Francisco. On the day after to-morrow we can

sail from Havre for Southampton, and thence to New York on a splendid steamship. Once on the sacred soil of America, we shall have nothing to fear. In that land of liberty, extradition is a myth, and I hope we shall be received with open arms."

"Very likely," said Valnoir, who had some notion of American politics.

"There," continued Taupier, "you need only have your claim presented by one of the ingeuous legal sharks, who fatten in all waters, and who can so wonderfully well protect our runaway cashiers when the French detectives follow them there. As soon as we have the papers straight, we'll go by the Pacific Railroad, which seems to have been opened expressly for us. In a week we shall reach San Francisco, where we can call at the Consul's, receive an order on the bank for the million, on production of our papers. Is that plain?"

Valnoir could not dispute this.

"Supposing you are right, what do you mean by all this?"

"That, to make this swift expedition to the Golden Gate, you need the copy of Régine's death certificate, which I have in my pocket, and by that fact alone, I consider myself as co-heir to your niece's fortune."

"Very well, I understand," said Valnoir coldly, "you wish to sell me the stamped paper that chance has placed in your possession?"

"Just so."

"Your conduct is characterised by a term that is not in the 'Dictionary of the Academy'—to wit, Blackmail."

"I do not deny that."

"Since you admit it, let it stand," said Rose's gallant, ironically. "How much do you ask?"

"I? nothing. I have such confidence in you, that I know that when you handle the dollars that you will give me my share. But—"

"Oh, there is a but—"

"But, as life is uncertain; as one of us may be arrested before getting to Havre; as the Atlantic steamer may go down, the Pacific Railroad train blow up—"

"Curtail your conjectures."

"In short, you may die, and I may survive you, and against that improbable though possible eventuality, I wish to take my precautions."

"How?"

"Let me have a deed constituting me your sole legatee, signed and dated. This simple safeguard will prevent the million of this dear Count de Luot falling to the State. Régine will have inherited from him, you from her, and I from you—a cascade of wills."

"I admire your foresight," said Valnoir, "and I'll draw you up the paper at the next inn."

"That may be rather distant. I like things done at once."

"On what am I to pen it here—on an oak leaf or some birch bark?"

"No, that would not pass," said Taupier, with superb equanimity; "but I carry all we shall need."

Out of his pocket he drew a leather case, whence he took a pen, a patent inkstand, and some paper.

"Draw it up, my friend," he said, pushing the writing materials over to Valnoir, "and as soon as you get it into shape, I'll hand you the death-record in exchange."

The editor had hesitated, but now feeling decided, he dashed off a few lines,

which the humpback doubtlessly found correct, for in his turn he held out the official transcript.

"One for the other," he said, effecting the exchange. Then whilst his friend examined the certificate, Taupier rose, humming to a popular air : "The dead ride quick."

XXXVIII.

WHILST Valnoir and his tempter were wrangling over the spoils of their victim, Renée de Saint-Senier was dying of sorrow and anxiety. After her interview with Pilevert, she had passed through all the torments of distress. From the Saint-Germain terrace she witnessed the terrible spectacle of the conflagrations reddening the horizon. For four nights running she saw Paris burning ; but, great as might be her horror at this deed without a name, it was not the fate of the world-famous monuments that most interested her. All she longed to know was whether the man she loved were still alive amid that burning fiery furnace. As soon as she heard of the government troops entering the city, she spared no pains to obtain news ; but letters, messengers, personal inquiries, all were useless. The street-fighting went on, and only with special authorisation could anybody go in, and even then it was with difficulty. Feeling very restless, she awaited her turn to cross the barricades of the insurgent capital, meaning to perform in person what her agents had failed to do since Roger's disappearance ; and she looked steadily forward to success.

On the Sunday morning news came to Saint-Germain that the revolution had been crushed, and that the next day a journey would be practicable. She hastily made her preparations, and the day seemed the longer as the end of her anguish was near. She employed it in arranging a plan with Landreau for discovering her lover's whereabouts. They agreed on commencing with the Molinchar Asylum, where he was to have gone on that fatal day, the 18th of March, when he had ceased writing to his betrothed. More than once, amid her heart-torturing disquietude, she had remembered Régine. The veil, partly lifted by Pilevert's story and the examination of the contents of the casket, still hid much of the poor girl's life, and Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier eagerly wished to know the whole. She had long questioned the showman, but, despite his zeal, he could only tell her what he knew, namely, very little. He had been more explicit as to the duel, or rather murder, which he had witnessed ; nine months had elapsed since the lugubrious crime, and yet it dwelt unpunished. Many causes prevented Renée from pursuing her just revenge ; but those based on the political situation were fleeting, and family reasons were also fading away. Hence, she made ready to act, and, before quitting Saint-Germain, wished to give herself the melancholy satisfaction of visiting the spot where her brother had fallen. Pilevert was engaged to conduct the pious pilgrimage, and late in the afternoon of the last day of her exile, the young lady sat in a vehicle, which, with Landreau on the box, was to drive to the Chêne-Capitaine. The Hercules sat beside the driver, flattered and abashed at the same time with an elevation for which his past adventures had not prepared him. They proceeded along a shady, sandy road. The air was mild, and the blue sky gleamed through the branches, it being one of those sweet evenings which precede a burning summer, and are still refreshed by the last breath of spring.

"Nice weather!" observed Pilevert, for the sake of speaking.

Renée did not seem even to hear the remark, thinking as she did of other matters.

"Are we far from the—the place?" she agitatedly inquired.

"Three quarters of an hour will do it at the outside," he hastened to answer; "I took this road the other day when I went to dig up that box, and I am sure of my measurement."

Whilst this information was afforded, the vehicle reached a by-road, where Landreau pulled up short, with an outcry of surprise. Renée bent forward to see the cause, but there appeared nothing to her. Still the gamekeeper had jumped down without heed of his horses, which, however, remained peacefully on the spot. Scarcely had he alighted than he rushed out of sight up a side path. As much astonished as the lady, Pilevert expressed his surprise in inarticulate remarks. Mademoiselle de Saint-Senier paid no attention to him, but listened to the sounds in the woodland in that direction. It was a mingling of joyous outcries and broken sentences. Renée believed she recognised the voice of Landreau's companion, and her emotion was so keen that it was in vain she tried to open the door. Whilst her shaking hand fumbled with the catch, the branches of the underwood parted, and a man sprang forward to the carriage. It was Roger, pale, but safe and sound, without a wound, and beaming with youth and happiness. At this exciting moment, his betrothed forgot the long days of anguish and hours of despair. She even forgot her usually rather cold reserve, and frankly threw herself into her cousin's arms. Landreau tearfully beheld the loving embrace, and he was the first to find power to speak, for the lovers merely exchanged exclamations.

"Huzza, lieutenant!" shouted the old keeper, "I knew very well that those beggars couldn't hold you, and that I should find you whole and unscathed."

"Thanks, friend," said Roger. "I have escaped them, but I really never believed I should."

"You have been incurring danger?" murmured Renée.

"Had it not been for that girl's devotion, I should be dead."

"That girl?" repeated Renée in amazement.

"Régine!" rejoined the officer, "who ran in between me and the shot which one of the ruffians intended for me."

"But she lives?" asked Renée. "Oh!" she added as he stood silent, "a prisoner—wounded, alas!"

"Dead!" groaned Saint-Senier, "dead, blessing your name!"

This was too much emotion at once for Renée's heart; she fainted away in her lover's arms. The three men—for we must not except Pilevert—gathered around her, and she soon recovered from her swoon, on the grass under the bushes where Roger pressed her hands in his, whilst Landreau supported her. His clasp did more than the keeper's wild clamour, and when she opened her eyes he read a question there.

"She gave me this ere dying," said he, holding out the letter which the expiring heroine had taken from her bleeding bosom.

Renée tremulously seized it.

"My name here," she uttered on glancing at the address.

"Yes; she wished you to have her last thought," said Roger.

He had not forgotten the words spoken by Régine at the last moment, but they need not to be repeated to his cousin. She opened

the letter, but was far too agitated to be able to read Regine's fine, close hand-writing.

"Read it for me," she said to Roger, and he commenced in a choking voice :

"Foreseeing I shall die, I wish those who have sheltered me and cared for me to know my sad life. I am alone in the world, and to escape my father's inveterate enemy, the man who has disgraced our name, I have fled from the refuge left me to hide under a disguise for which I have often blushed. May my benefactress overlook my feigning an infirmity, the better to baffle the searches of my persecutors. I made a vow never to speak until I should have unmasked the villain whose devices made me an orphan. If I fall in my conflict, I trust the care of revenging me to the noble young lady who held out her hand to me in misfortune, and I entreat her not to forget my last wishes."

Roger stopped, surprised only to find such a vague expression of earnest gratitude. But soon he had the explanation of this laconism. The wrapper contained several enclosures, and on the second one appeared the will of Gabrielle de Noirval, appointing Renée de Saint-Senier her sole legatee. The other papers were precise notes as to her adventures, and a clue to where she had seen Taupier bury the stolen casket on the morning of the duel, and where she had been foiled by the Prussians in trying to dig it up on the night of her flight with the officer.

"At the foot of the Chêne-Capitaine," said Roger, thoughtfully, as he completed the perusal.

XXXIX.

NIGHT was falling, and the shadows stretched out from the huge tree upon the clearing where Louis de Saint-Senier had fallen under his adversary's guilty bullet. That adversary and Taupier had spent almost the entire day hidden in the thicket, and had only started on the march when it was late. Having often roamed through the forest in other days, the humpback threaded it with marvellous exactitude. Before leaving Paris, too, he had supplied himself, like a consummate topographical pilot, with an ordnance map, and he had not omitted consulting it on the way. By this precaution, he had succeeded in never going astray, and had met no one in the rarely traversed groves leading to the Maisons district. Valnoir followed him mechanically without uttering a dozen words during the tramp. Overwhelmed by remorse, borne down by anxiety and fatigue, he had aged ten years in a few days. On the contrary, Taupier whistled popular tunes, and his ugly face never lost its derisive expression. At a few hundred yards from the Chêne-Capitaine, he espied at the edge of an unfrequented path one of those cavernous sheds, in which the forest rangers keep their tools. The rough door closing the store-place did not oppose much resistance to his and his confederate's efforts, and they took a couple of pickaxes from the arsenal which they pillaged without scruple. Valnoir was ready for anything, and the humpback never stuck at such a trifles as burglary. They came out upon the open space at twilight, eye and ear on the alert, and the implements on their shoulders.

"All goes well," said Taupier, under his breath ; "the place has not altered in look, and I'll wager there has not been many sweethearts' meeting round about here since our affair 'of honour.'"

This cynical reminder still further clouded his companion's brow, but the wretched assassin little cared about displeasing him.

"Now's the time," he said, going towards the Chêne-Capitaine, "we shall have just light enough to identify the place."

They crossed the clearing rapidly, and when they came to the foot of the tree, the humpback pointed to a slight mound and cried :

"Here we have it!"

Without losing an instant, he doffed his coat, rubbed his hands as if he had been an excavator all his life and grasped his pick, saying :

"Fall to! and keep up your stroke! we must have the prize in half-an-hour."

Valnoir seemed not to hear him. Leaning on the handle, he absently looked round the woody border, muttering :

"There—it was there he fell."

Taupier chuckled.

"I still see him on the grass, his face blanching and his hand reddened with blood upon his breast—"

"Shut up! have you come here to act a melodrama?" said the humpback, shaking his friend's arm.

"Don't touch me! you horrify me!"

"I believe you are going off your nest, I do, on my honour!"

"No," said Valnoir so faintly that he was barely heard, "I am not crazed—I am afraid."

"Afraid? of what? bogies?"

"I do not know what, but I fear—"

"Come, come, you are too funky," sneered Taupier. "It really wasn't worth while your being born a nobleman, calling yourself the Count de Noirval—"

"I forbid you uttering the name my father bore!" said Rose's lover in a hollow voice. "My father," he continued to himself, "he also died assassinated."

"Ah!" said the humpback, changing his tone all of a sudden, "I am sorry for you; but whilst you are singing your elegy, I'll get on with the work. You can set to when I am tired."

Without waiting for assent, he vigorously attacked the ground with the iron pick. At the first strokes the sod flew up, and the soil could be removed with such facility that he deemed it suspicious, and begun to grumble :

"By thunder! anybody would think that the ground had been dug over lately."

Yet he did not cease his labour but continued to work away with uncommon liveliness. Valnoir leaned up against the tree, looking on and not seeming to be conscious of it. The sturdy gnome put so much ardour into the operation that in ten minutes he had dug a tolerable hole. As he progressed, the ground offered more resistance, a change that augered better for his success. Under the influence of this idea, he paused, wiped his brow, looked around without seeing anything suspicious and stepped out of the grave, saying :

"Take your turn, my friend. Your blue devils must have flown by now, and we have no time to waste."

Valnoir still wavered.

"I'll soon relieve you, never fear. I do not want your gentle hands to get blistered. Rose would be too angry with me."

Was it this silly jest that piqued the editor of the "Serpenteau" and induced him to take his companion's place? At all events, he leapt into the pit and bent to his work with the application of a man unused to such manual labour.

Taupier was behind him. With a more rapid movement than thought, he swung up his pick in both hands and brought the iron spike down upon Valnoir's bowed head with lightning swiftness. The latter was bending, and could not see what happened behind him. He doubled up, with a shattered skull in the pit, beside which the heinous humpback stood still for an instant, with a tearless eye, contemplating the body of his friend. Then his hideous mouth expanded to emit a devilish laugh.

"The dead ride quick," he said, "and the living get the prize. The Noirvals will hamper me no more," he added, flourishing the pick. "I began cropping them off in June, 1848, on barricade. After twenty-three years, I have the right to harvest the heritage."

Sprouting the body, he again began ploughing up the ground with feverish ardour; the clods dashed away under his hasty digs, and the gap enlarged visibly.

"This is astonishing," growled the villain, after some minutes' frantic toil, "I thought the box was not put down so deep."

Indeed the prize seemed so low down that the delver stood knee-deep in the pit. Before the ducl he had not dug so far down. Still he continued the task, though obtaining no success up to the end of another quarter of hour spent in new efforts, when he realised that the deposit had disappeared. Several tokens left no possible doubt. The ground was not of the fit consistency after winter frosts; it crumbled under the pick and the roots were severed by the spade. The humpback howled with rage, flung the pick from him and desperately climbed out of the pit. At that juncture there may have come a twinge of remorse—mayhap the first—to wring his heart, hardened by the habitual practice of infamous crimes. Suddenly his toilsomely netted plots had been rent, the edifice, reared upon crime, collapsed like a card castle, and Taupier stood all alone before his unproductive atrocities with a grave at his feet. Exile and grinding poverty, a frightful prospect, scowled before him; in his mind's eye he saw the squalid London dens where he had already dragged out an existence of squalor beneath the contempt of honest folk.

Leaning against the old oak, his arms folded and his eyes blearied, he was musing on the loathsome future awaiting him, when he felt a hand fall on his shoulder. He shuddered and turned at once. Before him rose a tall figure in a long cloak. His first impulse was one of rage. He darted to the stranger and tried to take him by the throat, but when he almost touched him, he uttered a yell of terror and receded with open arms.

"He! 'tis he!" he gasped.

"The dead ride quick," said the apparition, in a hollow voice, "and bear the living hence with them!"

At this capping of his quotation, the pitiable gnome staggered like a drunken man, and smote his brow to recall his reason escaping him.

"I am justice!" cried the new-comer, "and I come to tell you that you are to die here where you have been twice a murderer."

Taupier had recognised his former victim, Louis de Saint-Senier, appearing like a spectre from his tomb. Pale and threatening, he held a pistol in either hand, as if to offer his assassin a renewal of the encounter in which he had been so foully dealt with. Blinded by rage and dread, Taupier

clutched one of the weapons and tried to snatch it from his resuscitated foe. But in the hasty movement he made he unwittingly pressed the trigger; the weapon went off and the bullet pierced his heart. The wicked hump-back fell dead on Valnoir's remains. Régine was avenged.

The strange events that led up to this yet stranger sequel, are what great social crises alone produce. The war and the revolution that steeped France in blood were alone capable, too, of developing such characters as those figuring in our own tale. This era of madness and violence fitly framed deeds seeming impossible in quieter times. But for the siege of Paris, and the consequent tribulations of his race, Louis de Saint-Senier, miraculously healed of his wound, would never have been forced to hide himself so long in the pavilion of the Rue de Laval. Lingering months had he passed between life and death, and the night when he left his room for the first time was that upon which the miserable Frapillon received his punishment from Roger's hand. After that catastrophe, the convalescent had gone secretly to the château of Saint-Senier with those bearing his name. His strength had not enabled him to follow his sister to Saint-Germain; but as soon as he could bear the journey, he had started to join her. On crossing through the forest in a post-chaise, he had longed to see the place where he had been laid low. The God of Justice who chastises all murderers sooner or later, had brought about the rest.

Renée's wedding was performed in the chapel at Saint-Senier, at the beginning of the autumn, and the next day, the happy couple left for Italy. Podensac has renounced war and trade to become the agent on the Saint-Senier estate which he manages wonderfully well. Our brave Pierre Bourdier has sailed from Havre for San Francisco, where he is going to secure that fortune of the Count de Luot which is Renée's due. Louis de Saint-Senier has returned to the naval service and will soon start on a voyage round the world. Pilevert now wears Landreau's livery, for the latter has grown too old. As for Rose de Charmière, she went off to Berlin in the company of an officer of the White Cuirassiers whose acquaintance she had formed at Saint-Denis during the Commune. Molinhard is in London, where he cooks for his old friends of the club.

THE END.

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